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Allegiances

MOONCLAN

LEADER **Owlstar-** Fluffy white tom with blue eyes.

DEPUTY **Cloudwind-** Gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Skyclaw-** Gray tom with yellow eyes

WARRIORS *(toms and she-cats without kits)*

Ashbird- Gray she-cat with black specks and blue eyes

Whiteriver- White she-cat with blue eyes

Blacksky- Black tom with white paws, belly and yellow eyes
Apprentice, Cinderpaw

Ivystone- Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Stonefoot- Large, gray tom with amber eyes

Thorntalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Breezepaw

Snakepelt- Gray tom with yellow eyes
Apprentice, Shadowpaw

Smokeleaf- Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Sootmask- Black tom with white markings and amber eyes

Windsong- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Silverpool- Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Driftwater- Brown tom with amber eyes

Squirrelpelt- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Spidertail- Black tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Amberpaw

APPRENTICES *(six moons old, training to become warriors)*

Amberpaw- Golden brown and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon)

Cedarpaw- Brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Squirrelpelt and Thorntalon)

Shadowpaw- Dark gray tom with amber eyes (Son of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Breezepaw- Black she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

Cinderpaw- Gray she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Ashbird and Spidertail)

QUEENS *(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)*

Riverlight- Black she-cat with blue eyes, nursing Blacksky's kit (Crowkit, black tom with white markings and blue eyes)

Blossomfrost- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes, nursing Owlstar's kits (Icekit, white she-cat with blue eyes, and Frostkit, white tom with blue eyes)

Featherdawn- White she-cat with gray markings and blue eyes, nursing Sootmask's kits. (Badgerkit, black tom with amber eyes, Nightkit, black she-cat with amber eyes and Dovekit, white she-cat with blue eyes)

ELDERS *(former warriors and queens, now retired)*

Runningpath- Lean, brown tom with amber eyes

Berryfrost- White she-cat with blue eyes

Haretooth- Brown tom with amber eyes

Ravenfall- Black she-cat with green eyes

SUNCLAN

LEADER **Foxstar** -Ginger tom with white paws

DEPUTY **Mallownose**- Pale gray she-cat

MEDICINE CAT **Feathernose** - Soft silver tabby tom
Apprentice, Honeypaw

WARRIORS

Hawktalon- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Falconclaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Owlfoot- Pale brown tom with darker paws

Marshpelt- Dark brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sunpaw

Firetail- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Leafwhisker- brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Sandpaw

Stonewhisker- Gray tom with amber eyes

Moonfur- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes

Brightclaw- Golden tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Applepaw

Dovewish- gray she cat with blue eyes, former kittypet

Rockfall- Gray tom with amber eyes

Alderfang-Ginger tom with green eyes

Rowanfall-Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Briarheart-Brown tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Flintstripe-Dark gray tabby tom with green eyesApprentice, Slatepaw

Tallfern-Black, white and gray she-cat with blue eyes

Fernsong-Golden brown she-cat with amber eyes

Frostclaw-White she-cat with pale green eyes

Jayflight-White she-cat with pale green eyes

APPRENTICES

Honeypaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Sunpaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes (Leafwhisker and Brightclaw's daughter)

Sandpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes and light ginger paws (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Applepaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes (Owlfoot and Firetail's daughter)

Cloudpaw-White she-cat with blue eyes (Mallownose's and Rockfall's daughter)

Slatepaw - Black tom with amber eyes (Mallownose's and Rockfall's son)

QUEENS

Dovewish- gray she-cat with blue eyes, expecting Stonewhisker's

kits.

Nightwing- black she-cat with blue eyes, expecting Hawktalon's kits

ELDERS

Fishtail- Elderly silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

ASHCLAN

LEADER **Goldenstar-** Golden brown she-cat with green eyes

DEPUTY **Ivyheart-** Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Featherstorm-** Gray she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Eaglepaw

WARRIORS

Robinflight- Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Hollypaw

Graywillow- Long furred, gray she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Mousepaw

Berryleaf- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Dustclaw- Pale brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Ripplestep- Black tom with yellow eyes

Cinderflower- Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Cloverpaw

Jayflight- Dark gray tabby tom
Apprentice, Lionpaw

Tawnyfrost- Dappled brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Rainpaw

Owlstorm- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Scorchlight- Ginger tom with green eyes

Ravenfur- Black she-cat with yellow eyes

Silverstripe- Silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Duskwhisker- Cream colored she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Mudpaw

Gorsestrike- Dark gray tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Roseclaw - Ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

APPRENTICES

Lionpaw- Dark golden tom with green eyes (Son of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Hazelpaw- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes. (Daughter of Goldenstar and Scorchlight)

Mudpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Cloverpaw- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Tawnyfrost and Owlstorm)

Rainpaw- Gray tabby she-cat with white paws and blue eyes (Daughter of Graywillow and Silverstripe)

Hollypaw- Black and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Mousepaw- Brown tom with green eyes (Son of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Spiderpaw- Black and brown she-cat with yellow eyes (Daughter of Berryleaf and Ripplestep)

Sharppaw- Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes (Son of Roseclaw

and Dustclaw)

Eaglepaw - Red-brown tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Roseclaw and Dustclaw)

QUEENS *(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)*

Mistypool- Silver she-cat with white chest and paws and blue eyes, nursing Jayflight's kits (Echokit, gray tabby she-cat with green eyes, Riverkit, blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes and Moonkit, silver and black tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Heatherstorm- Light gray she-cat with soft blue eyes, expecting Gorsestrike's kits

ELDERS

Cinderclaw- Gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Sandnose- Pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

LICHENCLAN

LEADER **Birdstar** - Elderly brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY **Jumpheart-** Golden brown tabby tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT **Sagefeather-** Fluffy gray she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Stormpaw

WARRIORS

Feathercloud - Soft gray and white she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Sparrowpaw

Patchfoot- White and brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Badgerpaw

Hareclaw- Brown tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Jaggedpaw

Sunstorm- Golden tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Daisypaw

Rowanfang- Dark brown tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Fieldpaw

Krestleflame- Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cedercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Maplepaw

Poppywing- Black and brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Ashstream- Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Gingerpaw

Amberflame- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes|
Apprentice, Vinepaw

Breezefall- Pale brown tom with amber eyes

Mothflame- Dappled gray she-cat with blue eyes

Skytail- Gray tabby tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Elmpaw

Fawnsky- Brown-she cat with green eyes

Mosswing- Brown she-cat with green eyes

APPRENTICES *(older than six moons, training to become warriors)*

Stormpaw- Gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Daisypaw- Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes (Daughter of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Badgerpaw- Black and white tom with amber eyes (Son of Feathercloud and Skytail)

Vinepaw- Brown she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Sparrowpaw- Brown and black tabby tom with amber eyes (Son of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Hazelpaw- Brown she-cat with amber eyes (Daughter of Cedercloud and Patchfoot)

Fieldpaw- Light golden-brown tom (Son of Kestrelflame and Hareclaw)

Gingerpaw- Ginger she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Kestrelflame and Hareclaw)

Jaggedpaw - Red-brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Fawnsky and Sunstorm)

Maplepaw - Golden brown and white she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Fawnsky and Sunstorm)

Elmpaw- Dark brown tom with amber eyes (Son of Mosswing and Rowanfang)

ELDERS

Tigercloud- Brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Dustfang- Pale brown tom with green eyes

Rockflower- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Prologue

Rain fell quietly outside, calming the cats in a normally stressful situation. Three cats gathered around one black she-cat, resting in a nest with panic rising in her chest. She had waited so long for this moment, since the moment she became a warrior. Tonight, she would finally be a mother. She looked around, a gray tom had a bundle of herbs and kept placing his paw on her round belly.

"It's almost time Riverlight." The tom spoke. "You'll do great." Beside the gray tom stood an incredibly handsome black and white tom with shimmering yellow eyes. Love flooded through Riverlight's entire body, if she wanted any tom to be the father of her kits, she wanted it to be him.

"Blacksky," The gray tom spoke to Riverlight's mate. "Stay up by her head and keep her calm. I'm not sensing any issues but you never know." There was something off about his tone, judging by Blacksky's tense, Riverlight sense that he sensed it too.

"Everything alright, Skyclaw?" Blacksky questioned, Skyclaw's ears twitched and he nodded.

"Yes, everything is fine. I'm just paranoid, I've seen bad births before. Everything will be fine, I promise." Skyclaw focused on Riverlight, who shared an uneasy glance with her mate. Blacksky pressed his muzzle against hers, calming all of her nerves.

"Don't worry, my sweet. These kits will be born perfectly, and the first thing they will see is the beautiful moon. That's how you know MoonClan cats are healthy and strong, when they're born at night." Blacksky's deep voice was so soothing to Riverlight, she closed her eyes and nearly forgot where she was, just breathing in the scent of her beloved. Her peace was ruined when pain ripped through her body, she let out a yowl of pain.

"Blossomfrost." Skyclaw called to the light gray she-cat sitting near the nursery's entrance. "Bring me that stick, please." Blossomfrost

stood up, her belly only just starting to get round. She placed a heavy stick at Riverlight's mouth.

"Bite down on that when you feel pain." Skyclaw instructed. Riverlight nodded, trying to prepare herself for the pain to return.

"Just close your eyes and think of the kits." Blacksky whispered as he rasped his tongue over her ears. "Think of that beautiful little she-cat you want so badly."

Riverlight let out a purr, imagining a pure black she-cat. "I want her to look like my mother, so I can name her after her."

"She would love that." Blacksky replied. "She would love to be here now, but you know she's watching from StarClan." Riverlight thought of her mother, Ravenstorm. Beautiful, fierce and loving. Taken from Riverlight just after she had become a warrior to greencough. Even in death, Ravenstorm went out fighting.

Pain ripped through Riverlight's body, she bit down on the stick feeling it splintering between her teeth. The pain was more than anything she had ever experienced. *For my kits! For my daughter!* Riverlight bit down harder, bearing through the pain the best she could. She could feel Blacksky's warmth surrounding her, she did everything she could to focus on him and not the pain.

Riverlight felt like she was in pain for moons, and was starting to think that it would never end. Even with Blacksy's comfort, she still felt as if she was at her ends with this process. *Stay strong, my sweet.* A sweet scent surrounded Riverlight, her eyes half-opened she saw a shimmering outline of a black she-cat. *Ravenstorm!* Feeling comforted and filled with confidence, Riverlight knew she was ready to have these kits.

"The first one is here!" Riverlight's eyes opened and she struggled to look over at Skyclaw as he picked up a tiny bundle of fur. It was almost all black, with a few white markings. "Blossomfrost can you take this one? Lick it and get its blood flowing." Riverlight couldn't take her eyes off the tiny black kit, was it a tom or a she-cat?

"There's another one coming." Skyclaw announced right as

Riverlight felt searing pain in her body, biting down on the stick one more time. This time, however, the pain lingered longer than normal.

"What's going on?" Blacksky asked, his voice muted by the blood roaring in her ears.

"This kit is coming awkwardly." Skyclaw replied, his voice slightly shaking. Riverlight couldn't focus, the pain was becoming too much. In the distance, she could hear the tiny mews of a kit. Was it the first one? Finally, the pain started to ebb away. "The other kit is here, Blacksky take it."

Blacksky rushed over to Skyclaw, taking the tiny kit in his jaws and began lapping at it's fur. The pain cleared from Riverlight's vision, but her entire body ached. She looked at the first kit, squirming and crying at Blossomfrost's paws. She then turned to Blacksky, the kit he had was pure black, just light Ravenstorm. "Is it a she-cat?" She questioned, her voice trembling.

Blacksky didn't reply, he just kept licking the kit. Blossomfrost picked up the other kit, resting it at Riverlight's belly where it began to nurse. "It's a tom." She purred. "And he's very healthy."

Riverlight barely heard the queen's words, she was focused on the other kit. It wasn't moving, it wasn't making any noise. What was wrong with it? Did it take that long with the tom? Skyclaw stepped towards Blacksky who looked up, grief flooding his eyes. *No.* "I'm sorry," The gray tom lowered his head. "But there's nothing we can do. "She was born dead."

"No!" Riverlight cried, her body thrashing. "She's not dead!" Blacksky rushed to her side, trying to calm her but Riverlight didn't want it. "Stop it! Get back over to our daughter! Keep trying!"

She tried standing up, only to have her legs give out from under her. The tom let out a cry of protest, Riverlight ignored him. She looked over at the lifeless body of her dead daughter, the daughter that didn't even have a chance to live.

Two days had passed, and Riverlight hadn't slept. All that pain, all

the fear, for nothing. The little tom was still alive, but Riverlight couldn't help but look at him and feel something wrong. Why did he survive? Why not the she-cat, why not the kit who she wanted? She didn't pray to StarClan for a tom, she prayed for a she-cat. Riverlight looked away from him, only wishing to see her daughter at her belly. She hadn't named him, she didn't know if she could. She named her daughter Ravenkit, even if she was dead she would be named after Ravenstorm. Riverlight couldn't fight away the darkness swelling inside her belly, her daughter should've survived.

Riverlight's ears twitched as Blacksky stepped into the den, his eyes sad but loving. Even Blacksky looked different to her, he wasn't the same. Nothing was. In his jaws was a small mouse that he set down before her. "You need to eat." He mewed, sitting beside him. Riverlight looked away, ignoring both him and the prey.

Blacksky let out a sigh, but did not argue. "I was thinking of a name for our son." He mewed, his voice attempting to be cheerful. *Our son.* The words grated against Riverlight's ears. "Since the she-cat would've been Ravenkit--"

"*Is.*" Riverlight cut him off, nearly hissing. "She *is* Ravenkit." She growled, still refusing to look at him.

"Right," Blacksky's voice dropped. "Since she is Ravenkit, why don't we name him Crowkit?"

"Fine." Riverlight couldn't bring herself to be enthused about her son's name. She looked out the nursery entrance, not even the stars brought her joy. She was honestly starting to wonder, would she ever feel happiness again? And the more important question: would she ever be able to love her son?

Chapter 1

Crowkit hid in the shadows of the nursery, his tiny white tail tip twitching. The orange and black butterfly slowly fluttered past him. Her narrowed his icy blue eyes, getting ready to pounce. With a heave he launched himself towards the insect, his two front paws flailing as his missed the butterfly and landed with a skid of dirt. He heard chuckling behind him and shot a toxic look over his shoulder to look at two giggling white she-cats. One with green eyes and slightly darker spots and one pure white with blue eyes.

"Great pounce, oh mighty hunter." The blue eyed she-cat, Icekit teased. "You're so impressive."

Crowkit spat at her, sticking his nose in the air. "I don't have to listen to you." He lashed his tail. "I'm *older*."

"That doesn't mean anything birdbrain." Frostkit laughed. "It just means you're bigger than us, but I bet when we're both warriors I'll be the stronger one."

"Plus you're only a moon older than us." Icekit added, licking her tiny forepaw. "And even that is just barely."

"*Maybe* you'll be stronger than Featherdawn's kits." Frostkit glanced over her shoulder at the small bundle of three kits at the white and gray she-cat's belly. "But if your hunting skills remain the same as catching that butterfly I'm sure all three of them will be a better warrior than you."

Crowkit swiped at the teasing sisters, their words didn't actually hurt them. He knew he would be a fantastic warrior, and he also knew that the two she-cats meant well. Crowkit didn't have his own sister, since she died the day they were born, but Frostkit and Icekit felt like his sisters.

"Be quiet you three." Crowkit heard the familiar groan of his mother, Riverlight. Attempting to sleep in her nest, but her eyes

were half-open as she glared at the three kits.

"Sorry, Riverlight." Frostkit apologized. "Can we go outside for a bit so we don't wake you."

"Yes, just let me sleep." Riverlight groaned, closing her eyes and seemingly trying to ignore the kits. Crowkit let out a small sigh at his mother, but followed Frostkit and Icekit out of the nursery and into MoonClan's camp. The sun was high and MoonClan was starting to get active. Crowkit winced at the light, wishing for the night already. When he could see the moon and stars. He couldn't understand why SunClan loved the sun so much, but he supposed they thought the same thing about MoonClan.

Crowkit looked behind him at the burrow that was the nursery, where his mother slept. Crowkit's mother constantly slept, Blossomfrost would play with and have fun with her kits but Riverlight wouldn't. Sometimes Crowkit couldn't even get her to talk to him, he would fall asleep beside her and when he woke; she would move.

Crowkit's father, however, was constantly visiting and bringing him out to play. "She was devastated by the loss of your sister, I'm sure she'll be better once you're an apprentice. Being in the nursery is upsetting for her." Crowkit was four moons old, and wished he could be an apprentice everyday. He wanted his mother to feel better, and he didn't blame her for being upset over the loss of Ravenkit. Crowkit wished he could've met his sister, sometimes he would dream of a pure black kit with icy blue eyes. The same eyes as him, only he had white markings. He had white ear tips, tail tip a dash on his chest and a single white paw.

Crowkit sometimes wondered if Riverlight blamed him for the death of Ravenkit, but Blacksky assured him that it was just sadness making her the way she was. Crowkit shook away thoughts of his mother and focused on Frostkit and Icekit. "Where should we go?" He questioned the two kits.

"We should go see our father!" Icekit suggested.

"What if he's busy?" Frostkit asked.

"We're his kits, he can't be too busy for us!" Without waiting for a response, Icekit bounded towards the leader's den. The leader's den was a large, stone den near the back of camp. Crowkit awkwardly followed the, Owlstar wasn't *his* father. He kept his eyes peeled for his father's black fur, but saw no sign of him.

With his head hung slightly lower, Crowkit followed Icekit and Frostkit. They reached their father's den and poked their head inside while Crowkit stuck towards the back. Inside was a large, fluffy white tom accompanied by a slim gray and white she-cat. Owlstar and his deputy Cloudwind. Owlstar turned to look at his two daughters where his blue eyes light up like the night sky.

"What are you two doing here?" He questioned, his voice gentle. Frostkit and Icekit bounded up to him.

"Riverlight wanted some sleep so she told us to come out into the camp and we wanted to see you!" Icepaw explained, putting her paws on Owlstar's leg. The leader let out a chuckle and brought his daughters closer.

"Well you know I always want to see you." He nudged both she-cats in turn who let out happy mews. Owlstar's eyes went past them, resting on Crowkit who was still sitting awkwardly in the den's entrance. "Hello, Crowkit."

"Hi." Crowkit responded, shuffling his paws awkwardly. He was sure that for Icekit and Frostkit it was normal to be with Owlstar, with him being their father but for him it was awkward just wandering into the leader's den.

"Your father should be back from patrol any minute now if you want to wait for him." Cloudwind mewed, Crowkit perked his ears up eagerly. Did the deputy sense how awkward it was for him? He nodded, bid farewell to Frostkit and Icekit and bounded into camp keeping his eyes peeled for Blacksky.

He sat patiently in the clearing, staring at the camp's main entrance. His tail twitched with anticipation as his icy blue eyes scanned for Blacksky. Soon enough, he heard voices in the distance and jumped to his paws. Crowkit watched as a patrol came over the hill and

descended into the clearing. At the front of the patrol was a gray she-cat named Ashbird, following her was Whiteriver, Ivystone, Silverpool and finally, Blacksky.

Excitement buzzing in his paws, Crowkit ran over to his father making an attempt to jump onto him. Blacksky greeted him with a laugh and nudged him playfully. "Hey there." He purred. "What are you doing out of the nursery."

"Riverlight wanted us out so she could sleep." Crowkit explained. "Frostkit and Icekit went to see their father so I wanted to see you." The rest of the patrol disbanded as Blacksky stayed with his son.

"Well I'm glad, 'cause I wanted to see you too." Blacksky dropped into a playful crouch, batting at Crowkit.

Crowkit jumped at Blacksky, landing on his shoulders and pretending to swipe at his back. "I got you!" He declared. Blacksky laughed and gently knocked him off.

"You'll have to try harder than that." Blacksky declared, jumping around while Crowkit swiped at him. Crowkit growled playfully and kept going for him. Blacksky dodged, but Crowkit didn't give up.

With a mighty jump, Crowkit landed on Blacksky's head, holding on as tightly as he could. Blacksky fell to the ground, pretending to cry out in pain. "You got me! Mighty warrior!" Crowkit laughed and burrowed into his father's fur. There was nothing better in the world than playing with his father.

"Blacksky?" Crowkit looked up to see a small gray she-cat with amber eyes. It was Cinderpaw, Blacksky's apprentice. "I finished my duties for the elders." She mewed. "After that you said would take me hunting."

Blacksky nudged Crowkit off gently and stood up with a heave. "I did promise you that." Crowkit's heart dropped, he stared at his paws. "Sorry, Crowkit." Blacksky nudged. "But I have duties as a mentor. But I promise that the day you become an apprentice, I'll take you hunting just you and me." Crowkit looked up hopefully,

his heart growing slightly lighter. He could wait to go hunting with his father!

"Sorry, Crowkit." Cinderpaw apologized, standing beside Blacksky.

"It's okay, I understand." Crowkit mewed, keeping his head high. Inside however, he was secretly jealous. He was Blacksy's son, he should come first! He knew arguing wouldn't help however, he just had to deal with it.

Blacksky left with Cinderpaw behind him, leaving Crowkit sitting alone in the camp. He glanced towards the leader's den where he was sure Frostkit and Icekit still were. His only real choice was to go back to the nursery with his mother, who was probably still sleeping. He didn't want to sleep, he wanted to play some more! Dovekit, Nightkit and Badgerkit were too young to play, Featherdawn kept them close and safe.

Crowkit flattened his ears and began padding towards the nursery, feeling somewhat defeated and sad. He had nothing else to do, sometimes he wished that Ravenkit would've survived so he could have a littermate to play with. Crowkit walked slowly, his tail dragging on the ground behind him and his paws dragging along.

"Why so sad little one?" Crowkit looked up as a warrior spoke to him, he saw the silver tabby she-cat, Silverpool. "I don't think I've ever seen a kit move so slow."

Crowkit twitched his whiskers, what did this warrior want? "My father had to go out with his apprentice while I was playing with him and Icekit and Frostkit are with their father. I have no one to play with."

Silverpool's ears twitched. "How about you play with me?" She questioned. "I have nothing to do."

Crowkit tilted his head. Why would he play some random warrior? He shrugged, Silverpool was his Clanmate and he did have nothing else to do. "Okay. What are we going to play?"

Silverpool looked around, her blue eyes focusing on something a

few tail lengths away from them. She padded over to it and picked a smooth black stone. "We'll bat this around. If you can get it behind me, past the warrior's den you win. If I get it past you at the apprentice's den then I win."

Crowkit looked past the silver she-cat, the burrow that made the warrior's den was about equal distance from the apprentice's den behind him. Silverpool was larger, but Crowkit was probably faster. "What do I get if I win?" Crowkit asked, trying to make this little game more interesting.

Silverpool chuckled. "How about I teach you something? I could teach you a simple battle move or how to hunt something."

"And if you win?"

"When you're an apprentice, you have to bring me new moss for my nest." Silverpool sneered, twitching her ears.

Crowkit nodded, he would be getting moss anyways as an apprentice, but he really did want to learn something. "Okay." He agreed. Silverpool placed the stone between the two of them and then stepped back just before the warrior's den.

"Go!"She called and Crowkit broke into a sprint towards the stone. Silverpool had to take less steps towards the stone but Crowkit did manage to reach it first. He batted it with his white paw and it skipped across the clearly behind Silverpool. She reached around, knocking it back towards him. Her strength made it go farther but Crowkit kept up with it.

He knocked it back to her, nearly causing her to trip over her paws. Crowkit followed the stone, wanting to knock it even farther. Silverpool intercepted him, knocking the stone back past him. Crowkit spun around on his paws, stopping it before it reached the apprentice den. With a powerful swipe, he knocked it even farther. Silverpool attempted to stop it but she missed and the stone skidded past the warrior's den.

"I win!" Crowkit jumped up in joy, feeling energized and proud. "Now you have to teach me something!" He bounded over to

Silverpool. The she-cat looked slightly out of breath, but Crowkit felt more alive than ever!

"Very well." Silverpool purred with amusement. "A deal is a deal. What do you want to know?"

Crowkit thought for a moment. "I wanna know how to hunt!" He declared, he would impress his father the first time he went hunting with him.

Silverpool nodded and dropped into a crouch. "The key to hunting is to keep your body low but free. In MoonClan we chase a lot of rabbits, so you have to be quick, fast and smart. Go over there and pretend to be a rabbit. When I go after you, you try and run away."

Crowkit nodded and eagerly went to where Silverpool instructed him to go. He waited for the she-cat to attack, and when she did he took off. He nearly made it to the nursery until suddenly Silverpool cut him off. He skidded to a stop, kicking up dirt and grass.

"The key to hunting rabbits is to be smarter than them. They may be faster, but you're smarter. When a rabbit runs, you run *around* it so you can cut it off. It also helps if you have another cat to hunt with." Silverpool explained.

"Wow." Crowkit was amazed, he had already learned how to catch rabbits and he wasn't even an apprentice yet! Wait until he told Icekit and Frostkit, they would be so interested! "Thank you for teaching me, Silverpool." He thanked the she-cat.

"You're very welcome, Crowkit." Silverpool purred. "Thank you for playing with me, we'll have to play again sometime."

"I hope so!" He felt excitement buzzing through his paws, but noticed that the sun was starting to fall. His mother would want him back in the nursery soon. He glanced over at Owlstar's den, Frostkit and Icekit were just leaving it. "I should get back to the nursery." He told Silverpool. "Thank you, again!"

"Anytime, Crowkit." She purred and Crowkit bounded off to meet Icekit and Frostkit, they greeted him kindly.

"You look excited." Frostkit pointed out. "What did you do? Did you play with Blacksky?" She questioned.

"For a while I did," Crowkit mewed, falling in beside the two she-cats as they made their way to the nursery. "But then he had to take Cinderpaw out hunting, so I played a game with Silverpool and she taught me how to catch rabbits!"

"Really?" Icekit's eyes went wide. "That's awesome! Can you teach us?" As Crowkit opened his mouth to respond, he was cut off by a yawn.

"I will," He mewed once his yawn had finished, he suddenly realized how exhausted he actually was. "But it will have to wait until tomorrow, I'm exhausted." Frostkit and Icekit agreed and they finally reached the nursery.

Icekit and Frostkit went to Blossomfrost who welcomed them with loving licks and purrs, Riverlight, however, was still asleep with her back turned to the nursery entrance. Trying to hide his disappointment, Crowkit climbed into his nest. He curled into a ball, feeling his mother's warmth nearby and closed his eyes.

His thoughts drifted, showing him images of hunting rabbits with his father and teaching Icekit and Frostkit how to hunt as well. He couldn't wait to become an apprentice, and maybe then his mother would notice him.

Chapter 2

Crowkit rolled over in his nest, unable to sleep any longer. Riverlight was still sound asleep, as were all the other cats in the nursery. He looked over at Frostkit and Icekit, hoping they would wake up soon but both of them looked sound asleep. He twitched his ears and sat up, not worried about waking his mother since she pushed him away in the night anyway. He stepped out of his nest and poked his head out into the MoonClan camp.

It was just past dawn and the night hunters were probably already asleep. Crowkit wondered if his father had done hunting at night or if he would be waking up soon. He wanted to play, he would be an apprentice in just a few days and he wanted to spend these last couple days playing with his father, Icekit and Frostkit. It would be a whole other moon before those two became apprentices, and he would miss sharing a den with them.

Crowkit directed his attention to the apprentice den, his future den. He saw movement as two of the apprentices, Amberpaw and Cedarpaw made their way out of it and to their mentors. He watched closely for Cinderpaw, wondering if she would take Blacksky away from him once more. However, there was no sign of Cinderpaw, just her two siblings Breezepaw and Shadowpaw.

Breezepaw, Shadowpaw and Cinderpaw weren't much older than Crowkit, he was about a moon old when they became apprentices, but they were still very far ahead in training. Amberpaw and Cedarpaw were *much* farther than Crowkit, they would probably be warriors soon. Movement from the warrior's den caught his eye and Crowkit directed his attention there, watching for his father.

However, only Silverpool, Driftwater and Sootmask emerged, he dropped his ears in disappointment. Either Blacksky hunted at night or he was already out on patrol, he kind of hoped that he was out on patrol.

Feeling disappointed and bored, Crowkit slipped back into the

nursery to wait for either his father or his denmates to wake up. He sat his nest and idly played with a small ball of moss. He suddenly remembered his game with Silverpool and wondered if the warrior would want to play with him again.

Silverpool is probably a busy warrior, I'm sure she has better things to do than entertain a kit. He thought, dropping his head. He hoped that his mentor would be nice and someone to keep him busy all the time, he hated not doing anything. Crowkit heard the rustling of moss and looked over excitedly at Blossomfrost's kits, but found that the noise came from Featherdawn's nest instead.

Nightkit was turning in her sleep for a moment, then looked up with blinking amber eyes. "Hi, Crowkit." She mewed, her voice a tiny squeak.

"Hello." Crowkit greeted kindly, the she-cat was probably too young to play but at least he had someone to talk to. "Sleep well?"

Nightkit nodded, letting out a large yawn at the same time. "Yes." She looked at her two littermates, still sleeping soundly. "My littermates are so lazy." She snorted.

Crowkit chuckled. "I know the feeling, they're not my littermates but Icekit and Frostkit sleep longer than a badger with a full belly."

Nightkit laughed and looked at the two white she-cats. "Are we special because we wake up so early?"

"Maybe." Crowkit shrugged, he didn't think that he was anything special just because he woke up before the rest of the nursery. "A lot of MoonClan cats like working at night so they sleep through the day."

"That's cool." Nightkit's tail twitched. "I want to hunt at night, but it sounds like it would be dangerous."

"I'm not sure." Crowkit looked away from the kit, glancing towards the sky. What was hunting like at night? "I'm sure you learn as an apprentice how to hunt at night."

"When do you become an apprentice? You're really big, it's soon

right?" Nightkit questioned him.

Crowkit nodded. "Should be in a few days." He blinked, he was both excited and terrified at becoming an apprentice. He would be doing it alone, without friends to train with. Cedarpaw and Amberpaw had each other, Cinderpaw, Breezepaw and Shadowpaw were all close, and all the remaining kits in the nursery would have siblings to train beside, he didn't have anything.

"When you learn how to hunt at night, will you tell me how to do it?" Nightkit asked, her amber eyes glittering.

"If your mother lets me," Crowkit purred, he did like the fact that cats wanted to learn from him. Just like he taught Frostkit and Icekit was Silverpool told him about hunting rabbits. "I'll teach you and your littermates."

"Thanks!" She purred. Her exclamation seemed to of roused Badgerkit and Dovekit who let out squeaks of complaint as they sat up with their sister.

"Why are you so loud?" Badgerkit asked with a hefty yawn, twitching his tail in annoyance.

"Because Crowkit just said that when he becomes an apprentice he'll teach us how to hunt at night!" Nightkit explained to her sleepy siblings.

"Really?" Dovekit looked at Crowkit with eager eyes. "That sounds cool! When will you teach us?"

"I have to learn it first." Crowkit explained. "I don't know when apprentices learn how to hunt at night, but when I do I promise I'll teach you."

"Yay!" Dovekit cheered, nearly knocking Nightkit over into Badgerkit. The black and white tom didn't seem as excited to learn about hunting, maybe he was just tired. Crowkit shrugged it off and left the young kits to talk amongst themselves. He stood up, wanting to see if Blacksky was up yet and he poked his out into the camp only to find something much weirder.

Cloudwind, Whiteriver, Ivystone and Sandfur were guiding four strange cats into the camp, a strange scent wafted off of them. Just behind Cloudwind was a brown tabby she-cat, her muzzle lined with gray fur. *Why is there a strange elder in our camp?* He wondered. Behind the brown she-cat was a golden brown tabby tom, a brown tom and a smaller, red-brown tom with spiky fur. He didn't look much older than Crowkit.

"Why is LichenClan here?" Crowkit heard Breezepaw question his mentor, Thorntalon who had his lip raised at the strange cats. LichenClan? These cats were from LichenClan? Why were they in MoonClan camp? Were they attacking? Questions raced through Crowkit's mind and his fur stood on end.

"Don't be afraid." Cloudwind called to Clanmates. "Birdstar and her followers come in peace, she just wants to speak with Owlstar."

"Why do they want to speak with him?" Stonefoot called from across the camp. "What is so important that it couldn't wait for the gathering?"

"Birdstar claims it's urgent and she has never given us any reason to be wary." Cloudwind's voice was calm as she spoke to her warriors. "If there's an issue I'm sure Owlstar will deal with it. The gray and white she-cat led Birdstar to the leader's den. "He's in here, I'll come with you."

"Jumpheart and Hareclaw, you can come with me. Have Jaggedpaw wait out here, we won't be long." The brown tom, Hareclaw, looked at Jaggedpaw and gave him a nod. The spiky apprentice sat down and watched the leader's den as Birdstar, Hareclaw and Cloudwind slipped inside.

Crowkit looked at Jaggedpaw who sat patiently, ignoring all the uneasy and untrusting glares from the cats of MoonClan. After a few moments, the MoonClan cats continued about their daily business, ignoring Jaggedpaw.

Curiosity pricked at Crowkit's paws, he exited the nursery and padded confidently over to the LichenClan apprentice. Jaggedpaw noticed his presence and looked over at him. "Need something?" He

questioned, his tone calm.

"Why are you in my camp?" Crowkit demanded, trying to make himself look bigger. Jaggedpaw wasn't much bigger than Crowkit, but he still looked more muscular.

"My leader needs to talk to your leader. Your deputy explained that pretty well I thought." Jaggedpaw replied, a twinge of amusement in his mew. *Arrogant!* Crowkit snorted.

"Well you're just an apprentice, why did you have to come?" Crowkit questioned, Jaggedpaw's amber gaze remained steady.

"Because Hareclaw is my mentor." Jaggedpaw looked over Crowkit. "You're just a kit, why are you talking to an apprentice from another Clan?" Crowkit puffed out his black fur in annoyance.

"You're in *my* camp, I should be able to talk to whoever I want." He stuck his nose in the air. "Plus," He added with a slight hiss. "You're not that much older than me."

"When do you become an apprentice?" Jaggedpaw questioned with a flick of his tail.

"In a few days." Crowkit responded, holding himself high. He wasn't scared of this apprentice, but he wasn't sure what Jaggedpaw was getting at.

"You're right," Jaggedpaw looked back towards the leader's den. "You're not that much younger than me, I've only been an apprentice for a little over a moon." Crowkit snorted, looking back towards the nursery and wondering if he should go back. "What's your name?" Crowkit's attention was pulled back by Jaggedpaw.

After a moment of confusion and hesitation, he replied. "My name is Crowkit."

"Well, Crowkit. I look forward to seeing you as Crowpaw at the next gathering." Jaggedpaw said, his voice kind. Crowkit's tail twitched.

"Crowkit!" A sharp voice made Crowkit jump slightly, he looked over his shoulder to see Riverlight standing outside the nursery

with annoyance in her eyes. "Don't you have better things to do than annoy LichenClan apprentices?" Crowkit's ears dropped and he looked at his paws, he shouldn't have came to talk to Jaggedpaw.

"Is that one of your elders?" Jaggedpaw questioned, looking at the annoyed queen.

"No," Crowkit grumbled. "That's my mother." He flattened his ears and turned away from Jaggedpaw.

"Yikes." Jaggedpaw said awkwardly. "I'm sorry, then." While Crowkit walked slowly back to the nursery. "It was nice to meet you Crowkit." He called, but Crowkit didn't look over his shoulder at Jaggedpaw.

When he made it to the nursery his mother was already back inside in her nest and glaring at Crowkit when he stepped inside. Frostkit and Icekit were awake as well, looking at Crowkit with confusion. "Crowkit, you're a kit you have no business getting involved with the other Clans." Riverlight growled. "Whatever reason that Birdstar is here is no concern of yours."

"But, what if it is?" Crowkit lifted his head, arguing with his mother. "What if there's something dangerous that LichenClan needed--"

"*Hush!"* The tone of Riverlight's hiss cut into him like claws, Crowkit ducked his head and flattened his ears. "Don't argue with me." She growled. "Now stay in the nursery and out of other cat's business."

Crowkit nodded without replying and sat in his nest, a good distance away from his mother. He could feel all the kits in the nursery looking at him but he refused to meet any of their gazes. He didn't want to play anymore, he wanted to hide and he wanted to get away from Riverlight. He didn't think he was doing anything wrong by talking to Jaggedpaw, but Riverlight clearly thought otherwise.

He wanted to become an apprentice so that Clan matters *would* be his business. He could go to gatherings and meet cats from other clans, he wouldn't be sharing a den with Frostkit or Icekit for a moon, but at least he wouldn't be sharing one with Riverlight for a

while. He wouldn't wake up and be pushed away or get yelled at for doing harmless things. Crowkit was ready to be an apprentice, and he would be an apprentice that the entirety of MoonClan could be proud of.

Chapter 3

"Are you ready?" Blacksky questioned, looking over Crowkit with expectant yellow eyes. Crowkit held his head high.

"Of course I'm ready." Crowkit replied, puffing out his chest. *I've been ready for moons!* "I'm going to be an apprentice."

Blacksky nodded proudly. "You are, and it's a big step. From this day forward you won't be a kit anymore, you'll be an active member of MoonClan."

"I know, and I'm ready for it." Crowkit held his father's proud gaze and looked towards the center of camp where Owlstar was headed. Anticipation tingled in his paws, he was finally going to be an apprentice. A myriad of questions raced through his mind, who would his mentor be? What would he do first? Would the other apprentices be nice to him? He just had to take a deep breath and wait it out.

"Let all cats old enough to hunt, gather in the center of camp for a Clan meeting!" Owlstar's deep mew rang throughout the clearing, sending chills down Crowkit's spine.

Crowkit walked beside Blacksky to the center of the camp, he felt more confident walking beside his father. Riverlight walked behind them, not speaking or giving Crowkit any words of advice or anything really. When they reached the center of camp, Riverlight sat down and looked at her paws while Blacksky looked at Crowkit with excitement.

"Today is a proud day for MoonClan, by naming apprentices we show that we will remain strong for many moons to come." Owlstar spoke confidently, Crowkit could feel the eyes of all of MoonClan on him, he felt energized by it and held his head high. He wanted to look like his father. "Crowkit, you have reached the age of six moons and it is time for you to be apprenticed." Crowkit held his breath. "From this day forward, until you have earned your warrior

name, you will be known as Crowpaw. " Crowpaw's new name already felt familiar. "Your mentor will be Silverpool, she is a strong and intelligent warrior and I know that she will teach you everything she knows."

Crowpaw looked at Silverpool in surprise as she stepped forward, her green eyes glowing softly and filled with joy. He didn't expect Silverpool to be his mentor, but he was incredibly glad that she was. Did Owlstar see them playing that day? Silverpool stepped forward, touching her nose to Crowpaw's. He felt warmth and joy spread throughout his body, he was finally an apprentice and he had a wonderful mentor!

"Crowpaw! Crowpaw!" The Clan cheered his name and he felt welcomed by them, he held his head high as his Clan welcomed him as a new apprentice. Owlstar jumped down from his den and padded over to Cloudwind to discuss something.

Crowpaw turned to Silverpool eagerly. "What are we doing first? Are we going hunting? You already taught me how to catch rabbits." He could barely control himself, he wanted to get out into the forest.

Silverpool laughed, placing her tail on Crowpaw's shoulder. "Calm down there, there's plenty to do, we have all day." Crowpaw felt Blacksky step in beside him, he looked up at his father, suddenly remembering his promise to take Crowpaw hunting the day he became an apprentice.

"Your father told me about your promise," Silverpool mewed. "But he has to take Cinderpaw out first, so while he's doing that I'll take you on a tour of the territory."

"And when you get back," Blacksky nudged him playfully. "I'll show you all the best places to go hunting." Excitement boiled inside Crowpaw, he didn't want to wait any longer and he had so much to do! Crowpaw looked around for his mother, wondering if Riverlight was happy to see him become an apprentice but he saw her slowly making her way to the warrior's den, for a moment, his heart dropped.

"Don't worry about her." Blacksky nudged Crowpaw's head away with his muzzle. "Today is your day, Crowpaw and you've got a lot ahead of you." Crowpaw looked at his father, shoving his worries about Riverlight to the back of his mind and focusing on the excitement of becoming a new apprentice.

"We should go," Silverpool purred, pushing Crowpaw forward with one paw. "We have a lot to see." Crowpaw nodded, bid farewell to his father and followed Silverpool as she headed outside of the camp. As they walked, he looked at the looming trees that shadowed over the MoonClan camp.

Ahead of them was vast moorland, his paws itched to run and feel the wind in his paws. "Will I learn how to swim?" Crowpaw looked at Silverpool. "Blacksky told me that sometimes MoonClan cats swim."

"Most MoonClan cats learn how to swim, yes." Silverpool replied with a purr. "And you will learn how to swim pretty early, there's a pond behind the camp where apprentices learn how to swim."

"What's swimming like?" Crowpaw questioned, trying to imagine his fur being soaked with water.

"It's like running, but you feel weightless." Silverpool explained. "In the season of greenleaf, sometimes there's nothing better than dipping into a cool river and swimming for a while. You'll also learn how to catch fish."

"I've never had a fish." Crowpaw mewed, looking around. Moorland surrounded him on either side, he breathed in the scent of the forest. He could smell water and prey. "What do they taste like?"

"Fish is one of my favorite kinds of fresh-kill." Silverpool mewed. "It tastes very different than rabbit or mouse."

"I wanna try a fish!" He exclaimed, jumping up onto a rock. "Is it hard to catch a fish?" He wondered if he was annoying Silverpool with all of his questions, but part of him really didn't care. He was an apprentice, he was supposed to ask questions!

"It's no harder than catching a rabbit." Silverpool mewed, clearly entertained by Crowpaw's antics, making him feel better about asking so many questions. "I'll have to teach you to catch some soon. There's a lot for you to learn."

"I can't wait!" Crowpaw raced slightly ahead, noticing a cluster of trees ahead. "What's that? Is that the end of our territory?" He looked over his shoulder at his mentor who quickened her pace to catch up with him.

"Not quite," Silverpool stepped ahead of him, nearing the forest area. "But close, we're nearing the border with SunClan." Crowpaw eagerly followed Silverpool, they neared the trees and he could see something sparkling between the trees. He could also hear the sound of splashing water. *The river!* He had to stop himself from sprinting ahead, but he moved a little faster.

They reached the trees and Crowpaw could hear rustling, he looked up and saw a bird flying off into the sky. He watched in awe as it flew towards SunClan territory, he wished he could follow it, but he knew that he was not allowed to cross into another Clan's territory.

The river came into view and Crowpaw was shocked at how beautiful it was. The sunlight reflected off the surface, making the water glisten like the night sky. "It's amazing." Crowpaw breathed out, watching the river flow by.

"It is." Silverpool mewed. "If you think it's wonderful now, you'll have to see it under the moonlight." Crowpaw imaged the river, shimmering with the silver light of the moon and stars, his heart quickened. "This is the border with SunClan, beyond the river is their territory."

Crowpaw looked over the river, SunClan's territory was full of trees. He felt claustrophobic just looking at the territory, how could they hunt in all those trees? He liked seeing the sky and feeling the wind in his fur. "Do they cross the border a lot?" He looked up at Silverpool.

"Not really." Silverpool replied. "MoonClan cats are really the only Clan cats who like getting their fur wet. If you look down there

there's a branch for SunClan to cross but that's only allowed for going to the Moonstone."

"The Moonstone?" Crowpaw echoed, his mind wandering as his mentor mentioned the Moonstone, something he had only heard of in stories.

"The Moonstone is farther that way." Silverpool motioned with her head to the west. "There's another river that marks the border with both the Spirit Woods and LichenClan. We'll see it if we keep walking."

Before Crowpaw and Silverpool could keep moving, he heard shuffling and turned his head across the SunClan border to see a patrol of SunClan cats, he tensed up for a moment but noticed that they all looked friendly.

At the head of the patrol was a pale gray she-cat, behind her was a dark brown she-cat with a smaller, golden she-cat at her side, a cream-colored she-cat and a brown tabby tom who looked rather annoyed.

"Greetings, Mallownose." Silverpool called across the border.

"Hello there, Silverpool." The pale gray she-cat, Mallownose, dipped her head kindly. "How is everything?"

"Everything is well." Silverpool purred. "This is MoonClan's newest apprentice, Crowpaw."

"It's nice to meet you, Crowpaw." Mallownose purred. "I hope that apprenticeship treats you well."

"Can we get a move on, Mallownose?" The brown tabby hissed, annoyance flickering in his amber eyes.

Mallownose rolled her eyes playfully. "Calm yourself, Falconclaw. There's nothing wrong with having friendly conversations with other Clans." Falconclaw snorted and didn't say anything else. Mallownose slowly shook her head and looked back towards Silverpool and Crowpaw. "Well, it was nice speaking with both of you, but we should continue on our patrol."

"It was nice speaking with you as well, Mallownose." Silverpool dipped her head respectfully. "Hope the prey runs well!"

Mallownose wished the same for the two of them before she and her patrol vanished into the trees. "That tabby warrior didn't seem very nice." Crowpaw pointed out to Silverpool.

Silverpool chuckled. "That's Falconclaw and no he's not a very nice cat. Mallownose and the others there are all rather kind cats, however. Mallownose is SunClan's deputy."

"She seemed nice." Crowpaw mewed, Silverpool turned away from the river and began walking along the bank, through the trees.

"Over there," Silverpool motioned with her tail to a large land mass surrounded by the rivers. "Is there the gatherings are held, the next one isn't very far away."

"Will I get to go?" Crowpaw questioned, looking towards the island. He wanted to meet more of the other Clans, unless they were like Falconclaw.

"That depends." Silverpool looked down at him with a teasing look in her eyes. "If you behave and are a good apprentice, then yes."

"I'll do my best!" Crowpaw held his head high, he would be on his best behavior in order to go to the gathering. The thought of other Clans brought another question to his mind, he looked up at Silverpool. "What did LichenClan want when they came to the camp the other day?"

"A LichenClan patrol chased a fox off their territory and it ran towards ours, Birdstar wanted to warn Owlstar in case it did and we could look for it and chase it off out of our territory." Silverpool explained, guiding Crowpaw farther along the river.

"A fox?" The fur on his spine stood on end, he had never seen a fox, only heard stories. "Did we find the fox?"

Silverpool shook her head. "No, but Smokeleaf led a patrol out to find it, they tracked it's scent to the twolegplace. We're pretty sure it went into there."

"Twolegplace? Where is that?" Crowpaw wondered if he would see it.

"It's towards the back of our territory, we don't go there much and kittypets don't often roam far into our territory. There's a good space of unclaimed territory between us and the twolegplace." Silverpool mewed, Crowpaw saw another branching section of the river getting closer. "After this we'll head back to camp, tomorrow I'll so you the rest of the territory." Crowpaw was disappointed, but quickly remembered that he was going hunting with his father after this, he picked up his pace and followed Silverpool to the rivers. "Over there is LichenClan territory." Silverpool motioned to the marshy area on the other side of the river. "And over here," She faced the other section, Crowpaw could see tall, thin white trees. "Is the Spirit Woods. That's where the Moonstone is, and where we communicate with our warrior ancestors."

"Will I ever get to see the Moonstone?" Crowpaw asked, straining his eyes to see farther into the Spirit Woods. "Or is it just leaders and medicine cats?"

"I'm not sure if you'll ever see it," Silverpool stepped in beside him. "But I know that all apprentices journey to the Spirit Tree, and one apprentice is chosen to go inside with Owlstar. It's usually the apprentice who has shown themselves to be brave, resourceful and intelligent." Silverpool nudged him playfully. "Judging on how good I train you, it could very well be you."

Crowpaw looked at his mentor with joy in his heart. "I would love to see it." He proclaimed, wondering how the Moonstone would possibly look.

"Then you'll have to earn it." Silverpool purred, walking past Crowpaw towards the camp. "Let's get back to the camp, you've got a hunting session with your father to get to."

Chapter 4

"Keep up!" Blacksky called playfully over his shoulder, Crowpaw stumbled trying to keep up with his father but quickly recovered. They bounded through the moorland until Blacksky came to a stop. Crowpaw skidded to a stop beside him, taking a moment to catch his breath, he had no idea how fast Blacksky actually was. "One day you'll be as fast as the rest of us." Blacksky playfully nuzzled his son, Crowpaw shoved him away with a laugh.

"What are we going to hunt?" Crowpaw asked, looking around for prey but only finding moorland. He has just returned from exploring the territory with Silverpool and now was out hunting with Blacksky.

"Hopefully rabbits, but whatever we can find." Blacksky sniffed the air, Crowpaw watched as his father tried to locate prey.

"Silverpool gave me a lesson in rabbit hunting when I was just a kit." Crowpaw mewed, sniffing the air as well.

"I know," Blacksky mewed, looking back at Crowpaw. "She told me she did."

"She did?" Crowpaw tilted his head. "Why did she tell you?" Blacksky chuckled. "Silverpool requested to be your mentor, after playing with you that day she wanted to be your mentor." Crowpaw's jaw dropped, he had no idea that Silverpool requested to be his mentor. "And she talked to me, she told me that I could take you out hunting anytime I wanted."

Crowpaw didn't know all of that, he didn't understand why Silverpool wanted to mentor him, but he was really grateful that she did and that she was allowing Blacksky to help with his training.

Blacksky sniffed the air once more and began padding away without speaking, Crowpaw quickly followed him. He trotted a

ways away before stopping dead, causing Crowpaw to nearly crash into him. Crowpaw opened his mouth to speak but spotted the large rabbit that Blacksky was staring at.

Blacksky looked over his shoulder at Crowpaw. "I want you to chase it," He lowered his head and whispered. "I'll cut it off and kill it, alright?" Crowpaw nodded, afraid that if he spoke he would scare the rabbit away. Crowpaw dropped into a crouch, unsure of what he was doing. He focused his mind on trying to remember all that Silverpool had taught him.

"Go now." Blacksky whispered, and Crowpaw broke into a sprint. He ran as fast as his little legs would carry him. He neared the rabbit and the rabbit took off, faster than Crowpaw could keep up with.

He forced himself to run faster, but his legs started to hurt. Just as he was about to give up, there was a flash of black and Blacksky pounced on the rabbit, bringing it to a stop and killing it quickly. He looked up with pride in his eyes. "Not bad." He purred. Blacksky looked fine, but Crowpaw already felt exhausted, his lungs burned and his legs ached from just one chase.

"Don't worry," Blacksky nudged him with a laugh. "Soon you'll be able to run like that and longer, your body just needs to get used to it." Blacksky buried the rabbit they caught and he faced Crowpaw. "In fact, we should work on running right now." Crowpaw looked at his father uneasily, he wasn't sure he could run much farther. "You know where the river to the Spirit Woods is right?" He questioned. Crowpaw nodded. "I want you to run there, as fast as you can and back to me. You need to stretch your legs and find that speed that's inside of you."

"I don't know..." Crowpaw looked away. "That one run tired me out."

"Nonsense." Blacksky pushed Crowpaw to his paws. "You are a MoonClan cat, it's in your blood. You can do it." The love and admiration in Blacksky's eyes filled Crowpaw with a newfound energy. He faced forward, preparing himself to make the run. "Go whenever you're ready."

Crowpaw took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment before he broke into a sprint. His legs were still sore from chasing the rabbit, but he couldn't let his father down. Crowpaw pushed himself forward, as fast as his paws would carry him. Ahead of him was vast moorland, approaching him incredibly fast. He could feel the wind whipping through his fur, almost as if it was carrying him.

Crowpaw ran even faster, his lungs burning but his determination burning brighter. He ran harder, excitement filling him when he saw the river slowly come into view. He slowed to a stop by the river, taking a moment to catch his breath. His heart raced and he looked in the direction that he had run, Blacksky was nowhere in sight but Crowpaw knew that he was waiting.

Crowpaw stepped up to the river, lowering his head and lapping up some water. It was cool and refreshing, bringing back a little bit more energy. He turned, feeling even more prepared for the run back and began sprinting once more. He put all his remaining energy into the run back to his father.

This run felt longer than the first one, but when Crowpaw saw Blacksky's sitting figure show up he ran as hard as he possibly could, coming to a clumsy stop when he reached Blacksky. He stopped and bent over, panting heavily.

"Not bad at all." Blacksky purred. "Soon, not even runs like that will get to you." Crowpaw looked up, thankful for his father's praise, but still struggling to catch his breath. "Why don't we take a slow walk to the river near SunClan and get a drink before heading back to camp. I'm sure you're exhausted." Crowpaw nodded and forced himself to stand up and walk beside his father.

"Did your run feel better at all?" Blacksky questioned as they slowly made their way to the river.

Crowpaw nodded, finally finding his voice. "Once I was running for awhile it felt better, and I was really determined to finish it."

"That's good." Blacksky mewed, brushing his tail along Crowpaw's spine. "Determination is one of the strongest things you can feel, it can save both you and your Clanmates lives. Don't ever forget what

it feels like."

Crowpaw nodded, trying to hold onto the feeling of determination that he found while running, but it just didn't seem to be there anymore. Would be be able to find it again? He hoped so, he didn't want to forget.

Blacksky and Crowpaw reached the river where they each took a drink, Crowpaw felt like he could drink the entire river with how exhausted he felt. Blacksky drank a lot slower than he did, and Crowpaw couldn't but help he was thinking of something else. Crowpaw watched his father, tall and strong with bright eyes full of life. He couldn't remember seeing Riverlight the same way.

Riverlight was thin, and held her head low with dull eyes filled with sadness. Crowpaw's ears drooped and he looked at his reflection in the river. His icy blue eyes were dull, but had a certain brightness to them. He didn't look much like his mother with the exception of his eyes. He had his white ear tips, tail tip, paw and the little dash on his chest which he got from his father.

"Does my mother hate me?" Crowpaw spoke, he didn't even realize he had spoken aloud until he heard a small sigh from Blacksky. His father wrapped his tail around Crowpaw's shoulders.

"No, Crowpaw." Blacksky mewed, his voice low and sad. "She doesn't hate you, she's just struggling with the loss of your sister. She wanted a she-cat more than anything, she wanted a she-cat that she could name after her mother so she could continue her legacy." Crowpaw looked up at his father, the look of sadness in his yellow eyes hurting Crowpaw. "She was devastated when Ravenkit was born, she never even got to live."

"When will she be better?" Crowpaw asked, he had been hearing the same thing for many moons.

"I'm not sure." Blacksky sighed. "I wish I knew, and I wish I could help her more but Riverlight is refusing help. She doesn't want to accept the fact that Ravenkit is dead and that there was nothing any cat could do to save her." Blacksky looked down at Crowpaw, his yellow eyes filling with love instead of sadness. "But don't worry,

Crowpaw. I will always be here for you and I will always love you, you mean more to me than all the prey in the forest and that will never change."

Crowpaw felt a rush of emotions, he felt love and pain, but mostly joy as he looked at his father. His mother may be struggling, but Crowpaw was incredibly lucky to have a father as loving as Blacksky. He pressed up against his father, looking up into the sky. He wished he could help his mother, and maybe he could. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine what life would be like if Ravenkit had survived, a question he asked himself multiple times.

What would she be like? Would she be kind and loving? Would she be brave and fearless and would they be as close as Frostkit and Icekit? Crowpaw wished he could learn, but he knew that Ravenkit was gone and he couldn't focus his life wondering what could've been. He had to focus on the future now, he was an apprentice and one day, he would be a warrior. Dedicated to serving his Clan to the very end, with determination fueling his journey the whole way there.

Chapter 5

"Crowpaw, wake up!"

Crowpaw felt a sharp paw jabbing into his side, he woke up with a start and faced Amberpaw. She was looked at him with confusion in her green eyes. "Calm down," She mewed. "Silverpool wants you."

Crowpaw let out a yawn, but nodded and climbed out of the apprentice den. It was a little bit after dawn and the only other apprentices awake were Amberpaw and Cedarpaw, he knew that Shadowpaw had been out night-hunting so he would be asleep for quite a while, but Breezepaw and Cinderpaw would more than likely wake up soon.

Crowpaw climbed out the apprentice den, stretching and basking in the warm sunlight. He looked around camp for his mentor, spotting Runningpath and Berryfrost outside the elder's den sharing tongues while Haretooth ate a large mouse.

"Over here, Crowpaw." He turned his head when he heard the call of his mentor. Silverpool was standing beside Blacksky, both looking quite excited. Crowpaw had been an apprentice for a couple days and he spent most of his training with both his mentor and his father. With his tail high, Crowpaw padded over to Silverpool and his father, wondering what they needed.

"What are we doing?" He questioned, looking from both Silverpool and Blacksky.

"We're going swimming today." Silverpool mewed.

"Really?" Crowpaw nearly jumped up in joy, he had been wanting to learn how to swim since he became an apprentice.

"I'm bringing Cinderpaw too." Blacksky mewed. "Swimming is not my favorite activity--" He looked away with slight awkwardness. "So I figured that now would be a good time for her to get some decent

swimming lessons in."

"Amberpaw should've woken her up as well." Silverpool mewed, looking towards the apprentice den. After a few moments both Amberpaw and Cinderpaw stepped out into the camp, Cinderpaw shaking her dark fur before padding over to the groups of cats.

"What's going on?" She questioned, looking at Silverpool and Crowpaw.

"Swimming lessons today." Blacksky explained. "You haven't gotten as much swim training as you should, so today you'll be learning with Crowpaw and Silverpool."

"Sounds fun." Cinderpaw mewed, licking down a stray piece of fur on her chest.

"Then let's go." Silverpool purred and the two mentors led their apprentices towards the back of camp. Crowpaw walked alongside Cinderpaw, but close to Blacksky. He had seen the pond behind the camp once before, but he hadn't swam in it yet.

The pond wasn't far from the camp and they reached it shortly. It was large enough for the cats to swim, but not deep enough to be dangerous to an apprentice. There was a small stream that poured into the pond and was connected to the river.

"Here we are." Silverpool looked into the river, she looked to Crowpaw with excited green eyes. "Are you ready?"

Crowpaw looked at the still water, suddenly unsure if he was ready to swim. What if he made a fool of himself? At his hesitation, Silverpool let out a chuckle. "It's alright, Crowpaw." She stepped into the pond, the water nearly coming up to her belly fur. "There's nothing dangerous about this pond."

Crowpaw looked at his father who gave him an encouraging nod and the apprenticed faced the pond once more. He took a deep breath and stepped into the water, he let out a shocked gasp when it chilled him to his bones.

Silverpool let out a laugh. "It's a bit chilly, I suppose I should've

mentioned it. You'll get used to it." Crowpaw nodded and forced himself to step more into the water.

"When you get to the center of the pond it's going to get deeper, and you'll have to swim. Just watch me." Silverpool explained and stepped into the water, it got deep enough on her that she had to paddle with her paws. "Move your paws underneath the water almost as if you're running. You want to claw with your front paws, and then kick with your hind legs."

Crowpaw nodded, taking very light steps deeper into the water. It very quickly rose on him, past his legs and to his neck. He placed his paw down, looking for a foothold but instead found nothing and slipped under the surface of the water.

His head was engulfed by the chilly water, sending him into a brief panic. He quickly forced himself to follow Silverpool's instructions and started clawing and kicking in a panic. Finally, his head breached the surface and he lout a gasp for air. His paws frantically churned the water below him and he noticed Silverpool, Blacksky and Cinderpaw laughing. His pelt would be burning if it wasn't for the freezing cold water, causing his body to tremble with shivers.

"You don't need to kick so hard," Silverpool instructed. "You'll wear yourself out. Stop panicking, and slowly move. You'll keep yourself above water and you won't be so scared." Crowpaw couldn't find his words through his panic and the cold, but he headed Silverpool's advice and stopped kicking so hard. He eventually slowed his legs to a gentle speed, but his head stayed above water.

"There you go." Silverpool praised. "Not so bad now is it?" Crowpaw let himself relax in the water, it didn't feel as cold anymore and he felt a lot more confident swimming and keeping himself up.

"No," He replied, surprised at his own chattering teeth. He heard another laugh from Cinderpaw and glared at the dark gray she-cat.

"If it's so funny," Blacksky said from the shore. "Then you can get in there yourself." He nudged her forward.

Cinderpaw scoffed. "You don't even like swimming." She teased.

Blacksky rolled his eyes. "I don't, but I know how to do it." He stood up and stepped into the water, Crowpaw could see the moment the cold got to him and each step he took was rough. Crowpaw stifled a laugh as his father awkwardly swam out to Silverpool and Crowpaw. "Now you get your sassy tail out here." Blacksky called to Cinderpaw.

She hesitated, but after a deep breath Cinderpaw stepped into the water. She let out a gasp as the cold water touched her. Crowpaw could see she was very much forcing herself into the water, but she soon reached the rest of the,. Crowpaw was a little upset that he was the only one who ended up *under* the water, but he was grateful that he wasn't the only one who struggled with it.

"Now that you're both out here." Silverpool mewed. "You can practice swimming, just swim around the pond." Crowpaw nodded and began swimming, it took him a while to get the rhythm. His nose kept dipping underneath the water, but he forced himself to keep going. Cinderpaw did the same, but she moved a bit more gracefully than he did in the water. "Swimming is helpful in more ways than one." Silverpool mewed, and Crowpaw noticed that both she and Blacksky were now swimming as well. "It strengthens your legs which makes you stronger and faster, and that's always helpful for both hunting and fighting."

Crowpaw hadn't thought of swimming in that way, but he noticed how hard he was working all four legs. With stronger legs, he could run longer and farther. *Maybe one day I'll challenge Blacksky to a race!* He pushed himself to swim a little faster, wanting his legs to get as strong as possible.

The group of cats kept swimming almost all day, and Crowpaw quickly grew to enjoy it. He loved the feeling of swimming and he was getting faster and faster at it, when Silverpool announced that they should stop he was a little disappointed, but night was approaching and he didn't want to be in the chilly night with soaked fur.

The four cats climbed out of the pond and shook their fur free of the water, but they were all still damp. "That was fun." Crowpaw turned to his mentor, feeling more energized than exhausted.

"I'm glad you think so." Silverpool purred. "We'll have to do it again soon, but there's other things to train. I think the next step is catching fish."

Excitement twinged in Crowpaw's heart, he wondered where they would be catching fish, he assumed the river but he couldn't wait. They reached the camp quickly and Blacksky dismissed Cinderpaw to go get some fresh-kill.

Crowpaw realized how hungry he was once he saw the fresh-kill pile, he hadn't eaten all day and he had worked hard while swimming. Near the fresh-kill pile was Riverlight, she was sitting alone and slowly eating a small mouse. Crowpaw looked at his mother, she looked thin and her black fur looked dull, he felt a pang of sadness for her.

"Hi, Riverlight." He purred, trying to greet his mother kindly. In the days that he had been an apprentice he had barely seen her. Riverlight looked up, but she didn't look happy to see Crowaw. Her blue eyes went past Crowpaw and rested on Blacksky and Silverpool.

"Don't you have your own apprentice to train?" Riverlight mewed, her voice barely above a growl. Crowpaw wasn't sure what Riverlight meant, or why she was so upset but it made him uncomfortable.

"I *was* training my apprentice." Blacksky mewed, standing beside Crowpaw. "And for the record, there's nothing with getting involved in my son's training, you might want to try it sometime."

A blue fire flared in Riverlight's eyes, Crowpaw realized that the only emotions he had ever seen from his mother were grief and anger. "Don't tell me what to do, Blacksky. I don't have to do anything I don't want to." Her words cut into Crowpaw, he took a small step back. She didn't *want* to get involved with him?

"You don't want to be involved with your son?" Blacksky's fur stood on edge and his body tensed. "He's your son, Riverlight, you should show at least a little bit of care and concern for him."

"Why should I?" Riverlight snapped, Crowpaw took a step back. Riverlight looked at him, her icy blue eyes boring into him. "I never asked for a son, I asked for a daughter. I got my daughter and she *died*, leaving me with *him*." The amount of hatred in Riverlight's eyes nearly sent Crowpaw running. *She hates me. I knew it. She hates me.* His legs trembled, he looked away to avoid her deadly gaze.

"How could you say that?" Blacksky snapped, raising his voice. "The Riverlight I fell in love with wouldn't have done this, she wouldn't have turned away her own kit."

"The Blacksky *I* fell in love with never would've turned his back on me." Riverlight stood up, snarling at her mate. "You should've been by my side, comforting me but instead you waste your time with him." Crowpaw didn't want to hear anymore, he could feel the rest of the Clan starting to look at him them.

"I would never turn my back on you or my son!" Blacksky shouted. "*You're* the one who has turned your back on us, if you would just notice Crowpaw for even a moment you would know that he is *just* like your mother. He is brave, and energetic, and caring. He is an incredible cat but you're just too blinded by Ravenkit to see it!"

"He is *nothing* like my mother!" Riverlight hissed, pain spreading throughout her body. "Ravenkit should be the one who is alive right now! I wish StarClan would've taken him and not her!"

Crowpaw's jaw dropped, it felt as if his heart had been ripped out of his chest, his legs gave out and he sat down. *She wishes I was dead.* Now, he couldn't take his eyes off of Riverlight, the cat he looked up to, the cat he relied on, wanted him dead.

"That fact that you would even say that," Blacksky trembled.

"You didn't even care about Ravenkit!" Riverlight spat, her entire body shaking.

"Of course I cared about her!" Blacksky cried. "I was just as hurt by her death as you are but it's not Crowpaw's fault! Just because he survived and she didn't doesn't give you the right to treat him this way!" Blacksky silenced himself, he closed his eyes and took a deep

breath. "Riverlight, if you truly think that way then I can't call you my mate any longer." He opened his eyes, they burned with pain and anger. "You are not my mate and you never will be again, I love Crowpaw and I will raise him *without* you. Crowpaw deserves love and care and that won't be from you."

"Fine." Riverlight growled. "I don't want anything to do with him *or* you." With a lash of her tail, the queen turned away towards the warrior's den. Crowpaw remained where he was, unable to move or speak, or even think. He stared at his paws, Riverlight's words endlessly ringing in his ears. *I wish StarClan would've taken him and not her!*

Crowpaw felt fur pressing against him on either side, he looked up to see Blacksky. He had his eyes closed, and his head hung low but he pulled Crowpaw close. Crowpaw closed his eyes and buried his nose into Blacksky's fur.

"I promise, Crowpaw." He heard his father's low voice as a whisper in his ear. "I promise that I will love you enough for both me and your mother, I will never turn my back on you." Crowpaw repeated his father's words in his mind, over and over trying to block out his mother's hateful ones.

He opened his eyes and looked past Blacksky where Silverpool sat, the she-cat had a dark, pained look in her eyes. When she met Crowpaw's gaze, they filled with a strong feeling of love, the same look that Blacksky gave him. *I don't need, Riverlight.* Crowpaw told himself, willing to believe in it. *I have my father, and SIlverpool is more of a mother than Riverlight ever will be to me.* He closed his eyes once more. *I can do this without her.*

Chapter 6

Crowpaw stared at his fresh-kill, struggling to find his appetite. He flicked his tail and looked away from it. Beside, Amberpaw and Cedarpaw were eating their prey eagerly. Crowpaw flattened his ears. *Must be nice.* He thought bitterly. *Your mother doesn't actually hate you.* He slumped his shoulders and fought back a sigh. It had been quite a few days since Blacksky and Riverlight fought and Riverlight said that she wished Crowpaw had died instead of his sister, and the words hadn't left his mind.

Crowpaw lifted his head as he heard the voice of his father. He spotted Blacksky across the camp talking with Silverpool, they glanced at him for just a moment before turning their attention back to each other. Crowpaw sighed and looked back at his mouse, hunger was there but he couldn't bring himself to eat.

Crowpaw had done his best to avoid Riverlight completely, but it was hard when they were Clanmates. He couldn't imagine what it would be like when he became a warrior and they had to share a den. He closed his eyes, trying to think of anything else.

He opened his eyes when her heard pawsteps approaching, he saw Blacksky approaching him with a gentle look in his yellow eyes. Was he as upset about the whole situation? From the stories he heard, Blacksky and Riverlight were really in love before he was born. *Guess I ruined that too.* Crowpaw winced at his own thought.

"How are you feeling?" Blacksky questioned, looking down at the untouched mouse at Crowpaw's feet. Crowpaw didn't respond, he just shrugged. "I just spoke with Silverpool," He glanced over his shoulder at the silver she-cat. "And we wanted to know if you wanted to go to the gathering tonight?" Crowpaw opened his mind to say no, but quickly realized it was something he had been wanting to do for a while now, he didn't want to let what happen ruin his entire apprenticeship for him.

"Yeah, I do." Crowpaw replied, he saw Blacksky's eyes light up

slightly which made Crowpaw feel slightly better.

"You better eat up then," He motioned towards the mouse. "If you don't, you'll regret it. It's a long night." Blacksky touched his nose to Crowpaw's forehead and padded away to the fresh-kill pile, presumably to get prey for himself. Crowpaw noticed Amberpaw and Cedarpaw looking at him, but saying nothing.

The entire Clan knew about the huge argument and the fact that Riverlight rejected Crowpaw and that his parents were no longer mates. He was grateful that no one would talk to him about it, but a little annoyed that they kept looking at him with stupid, sympathetic looks in there eyes. He was sure he wasn't the only one with parents that didn't stay mates, right? Crowpaw shook his head and forced himself to take a bite of his mouse.

After eating, Crowpaw decided to pay a visit to Frostkit and Icekit. He hadn't seen much of them since he became an apprentice and he felt bad. They would be apprentices very soon and he wanted to make sure they knew they were still friends. He padded over to the nursery and poked his head inside.

Frostkit and Icekit were wrestling in a pile of moss while Badgerkit, Nightkit and Dovekit watched in awe and cheered for the two she-cats. Icekit had Frostkit pinned, but Frostkit was putting up quite the fight. Behind them, Blossomfrost was watching with exhausted eyes and Featherdawn shared the same expression.

It was Nightkit who spotted Crowpaw first and she shouted his name with jubilation. "Crowpaw! You're here!" She mewed happily and jumped to her paws. Frostkit and Icekit stopped their fighting and looked over at Crowpaw with surprise in their eyes.

Frostkit shoved Icekit off and bounced over to him. "It's about time you come see us you furball!" She shoved him playfully.

"Sorry." He apologized, feeling slightly guilty. "Being an apprentice keeps me busy."

"Too busy to see your best friends?" Icekit asked, pouting. Crowpaw could tell she was just joking, but his guilt grew. He should've seen

them a lot more.

"Give the poor cat a break." Frostkit nudged her sister. "He's a big, important apprentice now."

"Did you learn how to hunt at night yet?" Dovekit asked, tumbling over her brother and sister to get to Crowpaw, Nightkit followed closely behind.

"Not yet." Crowpaw mewed, Dovekit and Nightkit dropped their heads slightly. "But I'm sure it's going to be soon."

"Are you doing anything right now?" Icekit questioned. "Like going out hunting or something?"

Crowpaw shook his head. "Not that I know of, I'm going to the gathering tonight."

"I can't wait to go to my first gathering." Frostkit's tail twitched with excitement. "Are you going to make a friend from another Clan?" She questioned with sparkling green eyes.

"If I can." Crowpaw replied, wondering if it was smart or not to make friends from other Clans. He thought about meeting Jaggedpaw before he became an apprentice. Maybe Jaggedpaw would be there, he remembered the apprentice being kind. However, Crowpaw wasn't sure if he even felt like making friends, he would probably be sticking near Blacksky the entire time.

"By the next gathering we'll be apprentices, maybe we'll be able to go." Icekit nudged her sister before turning back to Crowpaw. "And then you could show us everything."

Crowpaw enjoyed that idea, having friends to spend time with instead of just his mentor and father. He felt distant from the other apprentice's, they were all siblings and incredibly close. Amberpaw was kind most of the time, but had a very sharp edge to her and Cedarpaw was always at her side to back her up, no matter how rude or absurd she was being. The only apprentice Crowpaw even remotely spent time with was Cinderpaw when she went training with them.

"Crowpaw!" Crowpaw turned his head, Silverpool's voice pulling him out of his thoughts. His mentor was standing near the leader's den where the Clan was starting to gather. "It's time to go." Crowpaw stood up and looked at the group of kits.

"Tell us about it when you get back!" Frostkit jumped up, twitching her whiskers with excitement. "You better tell us everything!"

Crowpaw nodded. "I promise I will." He mewed, trying to keep his voice lifted before he turned and made his way to Silverpool. Blacksky approached the two of them as he reached the group. Riverlight wasn't anywhere in the group, probably sleeping in the warrior's den as she normally did. Crowpaw couldn't help but feel grateful that she wasn't coming along, he would have a night away from her and her venomous glares.

"If we're all ready," Owlstar spoke up. "We should get going." Owlstar began leading the Clan out of camp with Cloudwind at his side. Crowpaw walked in between Silverpool and Blacksky with nerves silently clawing at him. They walked through the moorland, the late night newleaf breeze stirring their fur. He breathed in the comforting scent of the moorland and the surrounding rivers, trying to calm his nerves.

Crowpaw felt a cat nudge him and he looked to see Blacksky, his yellow eyes giving him a reassuring look that lifted his spirits slightly. Crowpaw struggled to hold his head high, but he managed.

The river came into view, as did the trees that surrounded that gathering hollow. This is the first time he would be seeing the leaders of SunClan and AshClan, he had already seen Birdstar. She looked very old, Crowpaw wondered how old she was. MoonClan reached the river, the cats stepping in with ease.

Crowpaw stepped into the water, the soft sand underneath his paws felt calming and relaxing as did the cool water against his pelt. For a moment he longed to swim again, they hadn't gone swimming since his initial lesson. He got out of the water along with Blacksky and Silverpool, shaking water from their pelts and continuing forward.

As they neared the island a flurry of strange scents flooded Crowpaw's nose. He could smell trees and pine mixing together in the air. The scents of the other Clans nearly overwhelmed by the scent of his own, putting him instantly on edge. Crowpaw lowered his head slightly, his ears twitching as he heard voices in the distance.

The trees towered over him, making Crowpaw feel slightly uncomfortable. He stuck closer to Blacksky as they neared the hollow. There were several cats, more than all of MoonClan down there talking to each other. Crowpaw lifted his head, amazed at the amount of cats that were attending. He saw warriors and apprentices of all ages, looking at this crowd helped him to feel slightly better.

MoonClan descended into the hollow and Crowpaw looked around, trying to discern the other three Clans apart, but he didn't know what to look for. He looked towards the four towering trees towards the back of the hollow where the leaders would sit. Several cats were there talking, Crowpaw recognized one as Birdstar of LichenClan who, despite her age held her head high. Beside her were three more cats, Jumpheart and a fluffy gray she-cat with a smaller gray she-cat beside her.

The group of LichenClan cats were talking to a large ginger tom with white paws, a pale gray she-cat, a silver tabby tom and a small golden she-cat. Crowpaw watched the groups converse, he assumed it was the leaders, deputies and medicine cats of LichenClan and either SunClan or AshClan.

"Who is that?" Crowpaw nudged Blacksky, motioning towards the group. Blacksky focused his eyes on the cats.

"Well you saw Birdstar and Jumpheart. The she-cats are Sagefeather and Stormpaw, the medicine cats. They're talking to Foxstar, Mallownose, Feathernose and Honeypaw. They're from SunClan"

"It looks like AshClan hasn't arrived yet." Silverpool pointed out before turning to Crowpaw. "Why don't you go and try to talk to some apprentices? You can either find us when the gathering begins or afterwards, just don't say too much about MoonClan." She

purred. Crowpaw nodded, not wanting to roam off on his own, but he really didn't feel like arguing. He looked past Blacksky and Silverpool where Amberpaw and Cedarpaw were bounding off to a group of apprentices he didn't know.

Crowpaw turned away, taking a deep breath and walking into the group of cats. The loud voices and many smells were somewhat overwhelming to him, but Crowpaw kept calm.

"You're an apprentice now." Crowpaw nearly jumped out of his pelt when he heard the voice of a tom speaking to him. He turned to see Jaggedpaw with two other cats by his side. A dark brown tom and a golden-brown she-cat with white paws. "Glad to see you made it." Crowpaw could see the taunting in his amber eyes.

Crowpaw shifted his paws awkwardly. "Yeah." His voice trailed off, the she-cat looked friendly but Crowpaw couldn't help but notice something seemed off about the other tom.

"This is my sister Maplepaw and this is my best friend Elmpaw." Jaggedpaw motioned to the two cats. "This is Crowpaw of MoonClan, I met him when I went with Hareclaw to MoonClan camp."

"It's nice to meet you, Crowpaw." Maplepaw purred, her green eyes soft. Crowpaw felt warmed by her kind greeted but Elmpaw only issued a nod. "Is this your first gathering?"

Crowpaw nodded. "I haven't been an apprentice for very long. Is it your first gathering?" He questioned.

"No," It was Elmpaw who replied this time. "Our second, we've been apprentices for almost two moons."

"You all became apprentices together?" Crowpaw tilted his head slightly, Jaggedpaw had introduced Maplepaw as his sister but Elmpaw as his friend.

Jaggedpaw nodded. "Our mother's are really close friends and had kits within days of each other."

Crowpaw nodded, thinking back to his own mother once more. Did

Riverlight have any friends? He also thought to Icekit and Frostkit, they didn't become apprentices at the same time but Crowpaw couldn't help but think that they were close. He wished they would become apprentices soon.

"AshClan has arrived!" Crowpaw saw a gray tom call, getting the attention of the rest of Clans. Crowpaw turned his head and saw a lean golden she-cat leading a group of cats into the hollow. Crowpaw couldn't help but feel a slight intimidation from this leader, she held her head high and her green eyes burned fiercely. Beside her was a gray tabby she-cat, she held herself high but seemed a lot warmer than the leader.

"That's Goldenstar and Ivyheart of AshClan. The brown tabby tom near them is the medicine cat apprentice, Eagleclaw." Jaggedpaw explained to Crowpaw. "Though, I'm pretty sure Featherstorm is their medicine cat but I don't see her."

"Now that AshClan is here." Foxstar called from the trees. "We should begin." Crowpaw looked around Maplepaw and Jaggedpaw to try and spot Blacksky and Silverpool, but they were nowhere in sight. *I don't want to be moving around during the gathering.* Crowpaw tense slightly. *I guess I'll stay here.* Beside him, Jaggedpaw and Maplepaw sat down and Elmpaw on the other side of him, Crowpaw sat down as well but felt incredibly awkward doing so.

He watched as the leaders climbed their trees, staring out over the Clans. The deputies climbed up on lower branches while the medicine cats gathered near the base of the trees. Crowpaw's eyes went to Owlstar who held his head high, all the leaders did in fact.

"Since AshClan is late," Owlstar spoke, turning his head to look at Goldenstar. "I suppose they should go first."

Goldenstar nodded and stood up, the moonlight reflecting off her golden pelt. "AshClan has very sad news to announce. Our beloved medicine cat Featherstorm has passed away due to her age. She served AshClan for countless seasons and will be remembered forever." There was a moment of silence between all four Clans, Crowpaw wondered if this happened every time. "However, we proudly welcome three new apprentices, one of which who has

become Eagleclaw's apprentice. Please welcome Riverpaw, Echopaw and Moonpaw!" There was spread of warm murmurs between the Clans and Goldenstar lifted her head. "Greenleaf is drawing to a close, but AshClan is still thriving."

"I'm glad to hear that, Goldenstar." Foxstar dipped his head to the golden she-cat. "If you're finished, I will go next." The AshClan leader sat back down on her branch and the other two encouraged Foxstar to go forward. "SunClan doesn't have much news, one of our kits was injured a while ago but thanks to our wonderful medicine cats she is making a full recovery. Prey is running well and our warriors are strong and happy." Foxstar sat back on his branch and Owlstar was the next to stand up.

Crowpaw felt anxiety rush into his body, the Clans would be cheering for him and him alone. He was the only new apprentice, the only announcement for MoonClan at all.

"MoonClan doesn't have much to announce, but we do welcome one new apprentice. Please give a warm welcome to, Crowpaw!" The Clan cheered and Crowpaw ducked his head, his pelt burning with the stares of all four Clans. He could feel Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw all looking at him. "Even as greenleaf draws to a close, the rivers are full and the rabbits are plentiful."

Crowpaw was grateful as his welcome died down and now it was Birdstar's turn.

"LichenClan is joyful to announce that Hazelshine has given birth to two healthy she-cats. Other than that, we don't have much to announce, prey is running very well."

"I suppose this gathering is at a conclusion." Goldenstar mewed. "I see no reason to rush home on this beautiful night, we should stay and enjoy the truce." The four leaders agreed and jumped down from their trees. Beside Crowpaw, the LichenClan apprentices stood up and looked at him.

"Do you have any siblings?" Maplepaw questioned, looking around the crowd of cats for a quick moment.

Crowpaw tensed, what was the correct response to this? He had a sister, but she was dead and he never met her. He withheld his sigh and shook his head, that was not something these cats needed to know. "No, it's just me."

"That's too bad." Jaggedpaw replied. "But I'm sure you have friends in your Clan." He tilted his head,

"Sort of." Crowpaw felt awkward. "There's two kits still in the nursery, they'll be apprentices soon and we're pretty close."

"That's great." Maplepaw purred. "How do you like being an apprentice so far? What's the best thing you've learned?"

Crowpaw thought for a moment. "Swimming." The LichenClan apprentices shared a confused glance.

"You *enjoy* swimming?" Elmpaw questioned. "We have to cross a river to get here but I hate getting my pelt wet."

Crowpaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Well, MoonClan cats love the water, with a few exceptions. My father is not a fan of swimming."

"I don't blame him." Elmpaw snorted. "I don't see how some LichenClan cats even enjoy getting their paws wet. We have such thick fur." His ears twitched.

"You're just heavier than most." Maplepaw shoved Elmpaw playfully and he flattened his ears.

Jaggedpaw laughed. "Well, it was nice talking to you Crowpaw. We should meet up with our mentors before the gathering ends, I'll see you at the next gathering." Elmpaw and Maplepaw both bid farewell before following Jaggedpaw into the group of LichenClan cats. Crowpaw was now alone, surrounded by cats and figured he would do the same thing and find Silverpool and Blacksky.

Crowpaw walked through the crowd, taking note of the cats around him. He noticed one of the new LichenClan warriors, Hazelshine standing very close to another cat. The tom didn't smell the same as LichenClan. *Is that cat from a different Clan? They look a little too friendly.* Crowpaw couldn't help but think, but ignored the two and

sought out Silverpool. The silver she-cat was talking with a ginger spotted tabby she-cat.

Crowpaw approached his mentor, looking at the unknown she-cat with interest. Silverpool glanced over at Crowpaw. "Hi there, Crowpaw, enjoying the gathering?" Crowpaw nodded. "This is Robinflight of AshClan, she's a friend."

"Nice to meet you." Crowpaw dipped his head respectfully.

"You as well, Crowpaw" The she-cat had a sweet voice and seemed quite friendly. Crowpaw stood beside Silverpool and looked around for Blacksky, but couldn't find his father's black pelt among the crowd.

Crowpaw sat beside Silverpool as they talked about Clan life in the two different Clans, but Crowpaw didn't really listen to what they were talking about. They held their conversation until the leaders decided it was time to leave. It was at this time that the Clans started to separate and Crowpaw spotted his father approaching him and SIlverpool.

"How did you like the gathering?" Blacksky questioned with soft eyes. "Meet any new cats?"

Crowpaw nodded. "I met some LichenClan apprentices, they were nice."

"I'm glad to hear that." Blacksky brushed his tail against Crowpaw's back and they turned to leave. Jaggedpaw, Elmpaw and Maplepaw had been nice and he felt better talking to them, but there was still something off in his chest. He wasn't sure he wanted to go back to camp, back to where Riverlight was, back to where he had to face her hatred.

Crowpaw took a deep breath, MoonClan was his home and he had to face it. There was no other place for him.

Chapter 7

"Frostpaw! Icepaw! Frostpaw! Icepaw!" The cats of MoonClan cheered their new apprentices while Frostpaw and Icepaw held their heads high and their eyes shimmered. Owlstar looked down at them with pride in his green eyes. Crowpaw watched as Frostpaw and Icepaw approached their mentors Smokeleaf and Sootmask, asking what they would be doing first.

Crowpaw looked towards Silverpool who was watching with excitement, he wondered what he and Silverpool would be doing today as well. He turned his head back towards Frostpaw and Icepaw who were bounding happily over to him.

"We'll get to train together now!" Frostpaw exclaimed, nearly jumping off the ground with joy. "And share a den again."

"I'll make sure both of you have a nest in the apprentice den." Crowpaw promised. The apprentice den was incredibly crowded, but he felt that it would feel a lot better to him now that Icepaw and Frostpaw would be sleeping in it now. He normally slept near the back, alone. Something he had grown used to being in the nursery with Riverlight, but now he actually had two cats to be close to.

"Let's get out there, you two." Sootmask mewed with amusement in his voice and amber eyes twinkling. Smokeleaf stepped in close behind him, looking at the two new apprentices.

"We're going on a tour of the territory." Icepaw explained, casting a glance up at Smokeleaf.

"Hopefully you're lucky and you'll meet a SunClan patrol like I did." Crowpaw purred, remembering his first day as an apprentice when he met the group of SunClan cats.

"That would be awesome!" Frostpaw jumped up, whirling towards Sootmask. "Will we? I've never seen a cat from another Clan,

Blossomfrost wouldn't let us go see the LichenClan cats when they showed up."

Sootmask chuckled. "We'll have to see if there's a patrol out at the same time we are." He nudged Frostpaw towards the entrance. "Now let's go, we have a lot of territory to see."

"See you later, Crowpaw!" Frostpaw called over her shoulder as she and her sister made their way out of camp. Crowpaw felt happy watching the two she-cats excitedly embark on their first day as MoonClan apprentices. He had high hopes that with them being apprentices, Clan life would become easier for him now. He would have something else to focus on other than his mother.

When Icepaw and Frostpaw were out of sight he looked up at Silverpool. "What are we doing today?" He questioned. Silverpool looked back down, the silver she-cat thinking for a moment.

"We'll probably go hunting, you could use more practice hunting rabbits." Silverpool stood up, stretching out her legs.

"What, the lesson you gave me as a kit wasn't enough?" Crowpaw questioned with a teasing laugh, recalling the day he played a game with Silverpool and was rewarded with hunting training.

"I'm afraid you need more than one lesson." She flicked her tail over Crowpaw's ears. "Let's go." Crowpaw stood up and began following his mentor. He glanced around camp before they left, looking for Blacksky but he wasn't there for the ceremony. He assumed that he was out training Cinderpaw. Crowpaw knew he would see him later and followed Silverpool out onto the moor.

Crowpaw breathed in the fresh air of the moorland, lined with scents of heather and rabbit. The vast territory of MoonClan spread out before him, his paws itching to run. He kept his nose in the air, trying to scent a rabbit close by. He kept his blue eyes peeled for any movement and noticed Silverpool doing the same. The walked across the moorland when Crowpaw caught a strong scent of rabbit on the wind. He stopped walking and scanned the area for any sight of the creature.

Silverpool must've scented the same rabbit because she stopped moving as well. "The rabbit is this way." She turned and began leading Crowpaw away from the SunClan border. The two walked with light, silent steps. Several fox-lengths away, Crowpaw spotted the rabbit, large and plump. His mouth watered at the sight of it and he looked at Silverpool for instruction.

"I'm going to chase, I want you to catch it." Silverpool explained. Crowpaw tensed slightly, to this day he had always been the one chasing them while either Silverpool or Blacksky would catch them. He nodded and watched the rabbit. "Go that way." Silverpool whispered, motioning with her paw towards a clump of bracken. "Hide there and keep watch."

Crowpaw nodded and crept towards the bracken, keeping his body low to the ground. His black pelt stuck out against the moorland, but he moved with silence and grace as to not disturb the rabbit. He kept his eyes locked on the prey the entire time, it's long ears twitched but did not move. Crowpaw reached the bracken and tucked himself behind it, hidden from the rabbit's view.

He looked over at Silverpool who was focused intently on her prey. She prepared herself to run, her sleek silver fur shimmering in the sunlight and her muscles showing underneath her pelt. She began running and was gone in the blink of an eye, charging towards the rabbit with extreme speed. Crowpaw's jaw dropped slightly, he had never seen his mentor run that fast before. She had to be one of the fastest cats in MoonClan!

Crowpaw pulled his attention away from Silverpool's speed and focused on the rabbit, she was approaching quickly and he had to move. The rabbit saw Silverpool coming and starting running from her, almost as fast. Crowpaw waited, watching the prey closely. It was approaching his clump of bracken rapidly. *Now!* He commanded himself and exploded out the bracken, running as fast as he could to cut the rabbit off.

The rabbit might as well have run right into his claws. He dug his claws into the rabbit's side and bit into its neck. It let out a squeak which cut off as it died. Crowpaw looked up at Silverpool proudly who trotted up to join him and admire their catch. "Great work,

Crowpaw." She praised, warming Crowpaw's heart. "Let's bury it here and go find some more prey." Crowpaw listened to her and hid the fresh-kill well, keeping a mental reminder of where it was. He padded up to Silverpool's side and they continued their hunt. Crowpaw's heart was still racing from the catch, he wanted to catch more.

He felt SIlverpool looking down at him and met her gaze, wondering what she needed. "Why don't we go fishing?" She suggested. "I haven't taught you that yet." Crowpaw's heart jumped at the thought of learning something new, but he wasn't sure if he would enjoy fish. He had never eaten it before, mostly rabbit with the occasional bird.

"Sounds fun." Crowpaw replied, at least he would be spending some time near the river one of his favorite places. Crowpaw followed Silverpool as she guided him towards the SunClan border, he could see the trees that lined the bank rising up in the distance. With each step, he grew more and more eager to catch fish. He always loved learning new things, even if he might not like to eat what he was catching, there were cats in MoonClan who would.

He could hear the river through this distance and saw the glittering crystals of the water through the trees, he had to stop himself from running ahead. They reached it on time and he looked into the flowing water, it was running a bit faster than usual but he was sure he could still swim. He looked up at Silverpool with excitement. "So, how do we catch fish?"

"The key to catching fish is to keep your shadow off the water, otherwise they will notice you're there." Silverpool sat near the edge of the river, adjusting herself so her shadow was clear of the water's surface. "Now you wait for a fish." Her blue eyes focused on the moving water, waiting. Crowpaw watched with curiosity and excitement.

There was a flash of movement and a splash as Silverpool hooked her paw into the water and brought out a fish. It's silver scales reflected the sun and she killed it with a quick bite. "And there you have a fish." Crowpaw looked at her prey with interest, then towards the water. "You watch the water until you see the fish, then

you scoop it out and kill it." Silverpool stepped back from the water's edge. "Now you try."

Crowpaw approached the river and sat down, his shadow casting over the water. It took some time to adjust himself, but soon the surface was clear. He looked at Silverpool who gave him an approving nod. He looked back towards the river, not seeing anything other than the rushing water. He waited for what seemed like ages, feeling antsy and uncomfortable. He was starting to lose hope in catching a fish when he saw a swift shadow underneath the water. He reacted as quickly as he could, unsheathing his claws and dipping his paw into the cold water.

He felt the fish hit his paws and he hooked his claws into its scales, pulling the fish out of the water with a large splash. When the fish breached the surface of the river, he lost his grip and the fish slid across the ground, still flopping around. With his pelt burning from his clumsy catch, Crowpaw quickly hurried over to it and delivered the killing bite.

"Not bad." Silverpool purred with amusement. "A little dramatic, but it works." She looked over the fish that he had caught. "Pretty big fish too, Berryfrost will love it. She loves fish."

"She does?" Crowpaw asked, thinking of the very picky elder. Every time he brought her a rabbit she would accept it, but with a hint of attitude. Crowpaw just assumed she was just picky, but he supposed that she liked fish more than rabbits.

"It's her favorite." Silverpool nodded. "A lot of cats in MoonClan love fish, including your father."

Crowpaw couldn't help but let out a snort of laughter. "He does? But he hates swimming."

Silverpool laughed and nodded. "Fish has always been his favorite prey, the only time I've ever seen him willingly get his paws wet and enjoy it is when he's catching fish." Crowpaw laughed along with her, his father hated the water but would get wet just for some fish.

"Of of these fish will have to go to him then, so we can spare him the torture of getting his paws wet."

Silverpool laughed and agreed. "I see no reason why we can't catch more, there's plenty of fish to the river and they come to us." She sat near the bank again and Crowpaw joined her. After the satisfaction of his first, albeit clumsy catch, he felt a lot more relaxed watching the water and waiting for fish.

The two of them hunted for some time, each catching three more fish with a large pile to take back to the camp. Crowpaw was incredibly impressed with their catch and looked at it with pride. The Clan would certainly welcome a large pile of fish to eat. They each took half the pile to carry back to camp and made a quick detour to pick up the rabbit they had caught earlier.

They reached camp and Crowpaw spotted Cloudwind preparing the night patrol which seemed to consist of Windsong, Cedarpaw, Driftwater, Ivystone and Oaktail. The deputy looked at them with approving eyes. "That's quite the catch, good job both of you." She praised. Silverpool dipped her head, unable to speak with a mouthful of prey and they made their way to the fresh-kill pile where they set down their catch.

"Why don't you take one of those fish to Berryfrost and take our rabbit to Runningpath and Haretooth, they both love rabbit and they can share it." Silverpool instructed. "Then you can grab one of these fish for yourself, you've earned it." Crowpaw nodded and picked up the biggest fish he could find as well as their rabbit and carried it to the elder's den. Inside Runningpath was licking a patch of fur on his leg and Berryfrost and Haretooth were talking about their apprenticeship.

Runningpath was the first to notice Crowpaw, his amber eyes were warm and welcoming. "Is that for us?" Crowpaw nodded and set down the rabbit before him and Haretooth and the fish in front of Berryfrost.

"Silverpool told me that fish is your favorite, so I brought you the biggest fish we caught." He held his head high.

Berryfrost gave the fish a sniff and looked up at Crowpaw. "It's better than what you usually bring me, good job kit." Crowpaw's ears twitched as she called him kit, but he held his tongue. Berryfrost was bad tempered, but she was still his elder and he was raised to respect them.

"Enjoy." Crowpaw dipped his head to the three elders and excited the den, his own belly starting to rumble. He got a few tastes of fish when he killed them and it left a pleasant taste on his tongue, he was eager to eat a whole fish. When he stepped outside he spotted Silverpool across camp giving a fish to Blacksky who accepted with joy. He touched his nose to hers which left Crowpaw confused.

How close were Blacksky and Silverpool exactly? He knew they were close when training Crowpaw, but were they more than just friend?. It had been about a moon since Blacksky and Riverlight stopped being mates, would Blacksky and Silverpool become mates? Crowpaw wasn't quite sure what to think of that. He loved his father and he loved Silverpool, and she *was* more of a mother to him than Riverlight ever was.

Crowpaw was open to the idea, he wanted both Blacksky and Silverpool to be happy, and perhaps that was with each other. Crowpaw stopped watching them and approached the fresh-kill pile, picking off one of the fish he caught earlier. He sat down by the apprentice den and began eating.

He took two bites, surprised at how much he enjoyed the taste of fish. It was almost better than rabbit! "Crowpaw!" He heard a familiar voice and turned his head towards the entrance of camp to see Frostpaw and Icepaw returning with their mentors. Sootmask and Smokeleaf sent them off and they bounded towards the apprentice den.

"How was your first day as an apprentice?" He questioned, taking another bite of his fish.

"It was amazing!" Icepaw jumped up, her eyes sparkling. "We saw the SunClan border, the LichenClan border and looked into the Spirit Woods! Then Smokeleaf and Sootmask showed us how to catch a rabbit and we're going hunting tomorrow."

"That sounds wonderful." He noticed Frostpaw looking at his fish with interest. "Silverpool taught me how to fish today, it's a lot of fun." He explained.

"What does fish taste like? Is it good?" Frostpaw questioned, her green eyes burning with curiosity.

"There's plenty on the fresh-kill pile." He motioned with his head. "Grab one and we can talk before we go to sleep."

"Okay!" The two sisters quickly padded off towards the fresh-kill pile and returned with a fish to share. They sat down beside Crowpaw and Icepaw took the first bite. "That's really good!" She said with amazement.

Frostpaw took a bite next and shared the same expression and reaction. "When do we get to learn how to fish?" She questioned.

"Whenever your mentors teach you." Crowpaw replied, taking another bite. "I learned how to swim first. I'm sure I could convince Silverpool to take you two training with us, I'm not that far ahead of you."

"That would be incredible!" Icepaw mewed. "Blossomfrost told us that she's one of the best swimmers in the Clan! I bet we'll be just as good as her." She nudged Frostpaw who nodded in agreement.

"I don't know," Crowpaw laughed. "My father *hates* swimming and I'm pretty good at it." He held his head slightly higher.

"Well, what about Riverlight? Does she swim?" Icepaw seemed to have noticed Crowpaw's expression at the mention of his mother's name. He stiffened and looked down at his fish, he didn't know anything about Riverlight.

"I don't know." Was all he said, he noticed Icepaw and Frostpaw sharing a gaze and suddenly felt guilty for bringing the mood down. He swallowed his sadness and finished his fish, looking up at Icepaw and Frostpaw afterwards. "While you finish your fish while I make you two some nests?" He forced his voice to be lighthearted and the two she-cats nodded eagerly. Crowpaw slipped into the

den, it was empty but knew that the rest of the apprentices would be joining in soon.

He made Frostpaw and Icepaw two nests near his towards the back of the den and looked out towards the entrance where the two she-cats were stepping into the den. "It's so cozy in here."

"There's a lot of apprentices." He chuckled. "Be careful of Breezepaw, he kicks in his sleep." Frostpaw laughed and she and her sister padded to their nests. Frostpaw laid in the one besides Crowpaw's and Icepaw took the one next to hers. Crowpaw settled down beside Frostpaw, enjoying her company as well as the company of Icepaw. He no longer felt alone in this den, not only did he have to cats beside him, but it was two cats who cared about him, and that's all Crowpaw needed.

Chapter 8

Crowpaw woke with a heavy yawn, he lifted his head and looked around the apprentice den. Almost all the apprentices were here with the exception of Shadowpaw who was probably out on dawn patrol. Amberpaw and Breezepaw's pelts were cold and their breathing still fast, Crowpaw assumed they had just recently returned from night hunting. Crowpaw rested his head back in his nest, looking over at Icepaw and Frostpaw who were still sleeping soundly.

They had been apprentices for nearly half a moon now and Crowpaw loved having them around. A few days before, Silverpool, Sootmask and Smokeleaf had all taken them swimming and they loved it. Both Frostpaw and Icepaw were incredibly strong swimmers, and they were both very energetic. A lot more than Crowpaw, he found it hard to keep up with them sometimes but he loved training with then nonetheless. Crowpaw laid in his nest, he assumed that Silverpool was still asleep so he would wait until the sun was higher in the sky. He relaxed in his nest, closing his eyes and waiting for the sun.

Crowpaw opened his eyes to find himself outside of MoonClan camp, standing on the moorland with the stars shimmering above. He looked around in confusion, wondering why he was here and how he got here. He took a step forward, noticing something in the distance. He narrowed his eyes, vaguely making out the form of a cat. He stepped forward, trying to figure out who the cat was or if they had answers but with each step he took, the cat appeared to get farther and farther away.

Anxiety crawled along Crowpaw's spine, he wasn't sure what was happening but he wanted it to stop. Crowpaw looked up at the sky, the moon wasn't in sight but there was a large star that stuck out to him. It was larger than the others and it filled with a sense of calm, he closed his eyes and opened them to find himself back in the apprentice den. *I was dreaming?* Crowpaw stared at his paws in

confusion, he didn't mean to fall back asleep. He looked around the den, more apprentices were gone now including Cedarpaw, Cinderpaw, Icepaw and Frostpaw.

Crowpaw stood up, carefully stepping over Amberpaw and Breezepaw as he made his way out of the den. He got outside and found it to be sunhigh. *I didn't mean to sleep so late.* He scolded himself, wishing he would've just gotten up when he woke up at dawn. Then he wouldn't have had that strange dream.

Crowpaw looked around camp, searching for Silverpool but couldn't find her. He spotted Skyclaw outside of the medicine cat den, setting out leaves in the sun before returning into his den. Crowpaw's ears twitched as he heard the sounds of laughter. He turned to see Nightkit, Badgerkit and Dovekit playing happily outside of the nursery. They were getting bigger every day, Crowpaw wondered if there would be enough room in the apprentice den for when they became apprentices. Perhaps Amberpaw and Cedarpaw would become warriors before then, freeing up two nests in the den.

Crowpaw finally spotted the tabby pelt of Silverpool speaking with Driftwater and Spidertail near the warrior's den. He approached his mentor, who looked up at him as he neared the group.

"Good afternoon, Crowpaw." Silverpool greeted her apprentice kindly. Crowpaw looked up at his mentor.

"What are we doing today? Sorry I slept late." He apologized, looking at the ground awkwardly.

"It's quite alright, Crowpaw." Silverpool rested her tail on his shoulder. "We're going on a patrol later, your father will be on it as well." Crowpaw's heart lifted, he loved patrolling with his father. "While we wait, why don't you go get new moss for Featherdawn and her kits. Skyclaw should have some."

Crowpaw nodded and turned away from the three warriors, going towards Skyclaw's den. As he padded across camp he heard hushed voices from Skyclaw's den. Skyclaw's was one of them, but he heard Owlstar as well.

"...Clan is in danger." Crowpaw stopped as he heard Skyclaw's urgent mew. "Foxwind spoke to me last night, but I couldn't quite make out what she was saying, other than a threat plagues MoonClan."

"Did she say anything else?" Owlstar questioned, his voice concerned.

"Only that there's a cat who will have to go on a mission and this cat could save the Clan." Skyclaw explained.

"Which cat? Was there any sign as to who it should be?" Owlstar's voice trembled slightly, Crowpaw felt uneasy. He knew he shouldn't be eavesdropping but whatever this was sounded urgent.

"No, there wasn't a sign as to who it should be." Skyclaw replied, sounding defeated. "The half moon is in a few days, perhaps I can learn more then. Until then, we should keep it to ourselves."

"You're right," Owlstar let out a sigh. "Just let me know if you have any other dreams." Crowpaw heard Owlstar starting to leave and he quickly made it to where it seemed like he was just approaching the medicine cat den. Crowpaw quickly came face to face with Owlstar who looked down at him with curious green eyes. "Hello, Crowpaw. Need something from Skyclaw?" He questioned.

Crowpaw nodded, feeling slightly tense. "Just some moss for Featherdawn." He replied, managing to keep his voice steady. Owlstar nodded and brushed past Crowpaw towards his den where Blossomfrost was waiting. Crowpaw let out a deep breath and stepped into Skyclaw's den, he was welcomed with the strong scent of herbs. Skyclaw looked at Crowpaw, his yellow eyes exhausted.

"Is everything okay, Crowpaw?" Skyclaw questioned, his voice still sounding troubled.

"I need some moss for Featherdawn." He explained. Skyclaw nodded and motioned with his head towards the far corner of his den. "You can take some from there. I also have some feathers to line her nest with if you want."

"I'm sure she would love that." Crowpaw replied, going to where Skyclaw instructed him. He had a large pile of moss near a small puddle on the ground. Crowpaw grabbed enough moss for Featherdawn and her three kits and turned to find a pile of feathers near his paws. He took the bundle of feathers along with his moss, nodded a thank you to Skyclaw and exited the medicine cat den. The nursery wasn't far, and the three kits were still playing outside. Hopefully they would allow him to make Featherdawn's nest.

Nightkit greeted Crowpaw as he stepped up, nearly causing him to trip. "Hi, Crowpaw!" He exclaimed, jumping around his paws. He nodded towards her, unable to speak as Dovekit joined in as well. He carefully stepped over the kits and into the nursery where Featherdawn was resting.

"Hello, Crowpaw." She purred. "I assume that's for me?" Crowpaw set it down and nodded.

"I also brought some feathers." He explained. "Should be pretty comfortable."

"I'll keep my kits busy so you can make it, thank you so much." She brushed her tail along Crowpaw's pelt as she shuffled her kits outside of the nursery. Crowpaw waited until they left to start making her nest.

Crowpaw looked over to where his old nest had been, and he really didn't miss it. Riverlight didn't care about him and he always slept alone. As an apprentice, Frostpaw and Icepaw now slept beside him and he felt more safe and comfortable than he ever did with his mother. He shook his away, shoving the not-so-pleasant memories of his mother away and finishing the nest.

He stepped outside, Featherdawn thanked him and brought her kits back inside for the day. Crowpaw looked for Silverpool who was now standing near Blacksky, Cinderpaw, Ashbird and Stonefooot. Crowpaw assumed that was the patrol and hurried up to meet them.

"Good, you're here now Crowpaw." Ashbird mewed. "We can get this patrol rolling." The gray, speckled she-cat began leading her patrol out of camp, Crowpaw fell in beside Blacksky and Silverpool,

excited to be patrolling with the two of them.

"Where are we going?" Crowpaw questioned Blacksky.

"LichenClan border, Cloudwind's patrol earlier scented LichenClan scent over the river." Blacksky explained. Crowpaw tensed, were LichenClan stealing prey? It was kind of difficult for a cat to "accidentally" cross a river, it wasn't a mistake that LichenClan cats were crossing the border.

The patrol neared the border and Crowpaw could smell LichenClan's scent a lot stronger than usual. Crowpaw's fur rose along his spine, he noticed movement across the LichenClan border, it must be another patrol. As they neared closer, Crowpaw made out the dark fur of Elmpaw. With him was a sleek gray tabby tom, a golden brown tabby she-cat, a white and brown tom, a smaller black and white tom and it appeared to be lead by the LichenClan deputy, Jumpheart.

"Don't attack unless I say." Ashbird instructed her patrol. "We're simply going to ask them about the scents."

They neared the border where the LichenClan patrol spotted the MoonClan patrol. "Greetings, Ashbird." Jumpheart said from their territory. "How's it going?"

"Hello, Jumpheart." Ashbird dipped her head respectfully. "There's something I'd like to ask you."

"Alright." Jumpheart replied. Out of the corner of his eye, Crowpaw noticed Elmpaw tense up, he didn't think much of it, but it was odd.

"Earlier today, one of our patrols scented LichenClan scent on the other side of the river." Ashbird explained. "Do you know why that might be?" Crowpaw noticed how calm Ashbird's voice was, she didn't sound accusing or rude.

"I wouldn't." Jumpheart replied, he appeared to be slightly defensive. Crowpaw hoped this wouldn't end in a fight.

"Why would any cat want to step foot in MoonClan territory?" Elmpaw mewed with a snort. "You all smell like fish."

"Elmpaw," The gray tabby flicked his tail over Elmpaw's ears. "Have some respect for others."

"Looks like your apprentice could use a few manners, Skytail." Stonefoot snorted with a flick of his tail.

"Don't tell me how to train my apprentice, Stonefoot." Skytail growled. "You're the ones accusing us of crossing the border. Elmpaw has a point, however."

"I'm not accusing anyone." Ashbird spoke up. "I'm simply asking why there could be LichenClan scent on the other side of the border."

"I can assure you that none of my cats have crossed the border." Jumpheart spoke louder, Crowpaw was certain that there was annoyance lining his mew.

"We wouldn't just scent LichenClan scent for no reason." Ivystone pointed out, sounding cross. "It's not a border you can just accidently chase prey across. You have to cross the river."

"Maybe the wind blew over the scent." The brown and white tom mewed.

"In all the moons that I've been alive," Ashbird stepped forward, her once calm tone was now sounding slightly angrier. "LichenClan scent as not just traveled over the river. I'm convinced that you know your cats have cross the border and now you're trying to deny it by making MoonClan seem like featherbrains."

"So much for not accusing us." Jumpheart lashed his tail.

"MoonClan may be peaceful," Ashbird hissed. "But do not mess with us, stay on your own side of the border or we will retaliate."

"Is that a threat?" The golden brown she-cat unsheathed her claws, causing Crowpaw to tense.

"It absolutely is." Ashbird held her head high. "Either stay on your own side of the border or face us."

"That sounds like a challenge." Jumpheart growled. "If I fight is what you want, Ashbird, then a fight is what you'll have. LichenClan attack!"

In an instant the cats of LichenClan jumped over the river to MoonClan territory. Crowpaw barely had a second to react before the small black and white apprentice tackled him to the ground. He felt claws digging into his pelt and hissed in pain. Crowpaw hadn't had much battle training, but he knew enough.

Crowpaw dug his claws into the thick fur of the black and white apprentice, raking his claws through flesh. He felt blood touch his paws and the apprentice backed off for a moment. Crowpaw managed to get back to his paws and face the LichenClan apprentice. The apprentice charged and Crowpaw swiftly ducked out of the way, turning as the apprentice struggled to stop. Crowpaw lashed out with his claws, striking the apprentice's shoulder and drawing blood.

The apprentice spat and lashed out at Crowpaw. Crowpaw felt claws rip into his foreleg, he hissed in pain and jumped backwards, nearly stumbling on a rock. The apprentice used Crowpaw's clumsiness and jumped on him once more, using his heavier weight to pin Crowpaw to the ground.

Crowpaw could feel claws ripping into his fur, drawing blood and blurring his vision with pain. He yowled in pain as the apprentice's teeth bit into his shoulder. Crowpaw struggled, but his legs were pinned underneath him. The weight was lifted and Crowpaw saw Blacksky lifting the apprentice off of Crowpaw. He stood up, legs trembling and his body burning from the wounds on his pelt

"Are you okay?" Blacksky questioned, his yellow eyes filled with concern.

Crowpaw nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." He licked one of the worst wounds, the bloody bite on his shoulder. Behind Blacksky, Crowpaw saw Skytail and Elmpaw running towards them. "Behind you!" Crowpaw announced and Blacksky whirled around to face Skytail, lashing out his large black paws across Skytail's face. The gray tabby stumbled backwards while Elmpaw jumped on

Blacksky's shoulder.

Crowpaw reacted quickly, placing his claws on Elmpaw's shoulder and dragging him to the ground. Elmpaw faced Crowpaw, it was now that Crowpaw realized just how much larger Elmpaw was compared to him. Elmpaw clawed his chest, sending pain through Crowpaw's body and sending him stumbling backwards.

Elmpaw kept on him, clawing at his ears and legs. Crowpaw did his best to dodge but the apprentice was fast, his claws cutting into Crowpaw's fur. "You need to work on your fighting skills, fish face!" Elmpaw spat, his claws striking just above Crowpaw's eyes. Blood spilled into his eyes and blurred his vision. He could hear Elmpaw fighting someone else, it sounded like Blacksky.

Crowpaw shook his head, clearing the blood from his eyes and looking at Elmpaw fighting Blacksky. Blacksky had more experience than Elmpaw and sent him nearly tripping over backwards. There was a flash of fury in Elmpaw's eyes and he lashed out, claws extending. Crowpaw moved to jump to his father's aid but came to a stop when he saw Elmpaw's claws slash at Blacksky's throat.

Blacksky's eyes went wide, and he stopped. Blood poured from a deep wound on his throat, Crowpaw stared in shock. "No!" He cried and jumped to Blacksky's side as his father crumbled to the ground. "Blacksky!" His voice broke the air and the fighting silenced, he looked down at his father, blood bubbling at his throat.

"Crowpaw, I--" Crowpaw heard Elmpaw said behind him, his voice trembling. Anger raged inside Crowpaw like fire, he spun around and faced Elmpaw.

"Get away from him! Murderer!" His body trembled, voice shaking. He felt weak and sick, Elmpaw flinched away and scurried away to stand by Skytail. Crowpaw turned back to his father, he was still breathing but his eyes were slowly closing. "Don't die!" Crowpaw wailed, curling at his father's side. "You can't leave me! I need you!" Crowpaw cried, pressing his nose into Blacksky's fur. "You told me you would always be by my side! You told me you wouldn't leave me..." His voice trailed off as Blacksky weakly lifted his head.

"I will be by your side..." Blacksky's voice was weak and raspy, but his yellow eyes met Crowpaw's. "I will *always* be here for you Crowpaw, please don't forget that." Blacksky's head fell to the ground and the light faded from his eyes.

Crowpaw let out a wail, feeling his heart shatter. His body trembled and ached with sadness. *He can't be dead. This isn't real.* Crowpaw's mind slipped into denial, he didn't want to say goodbye to his father, he couldn't! He had a mother who didn't love him, he *needed* Blacksky to help him.

Crowpaw felt a warm pelt beside his, he looked up for a moment to see Silverpool, her eyes filled with pain and grief. Crowpaw fell against Silverpool, trembling. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see his father's dead body any longer. He couldn't breath, he couldn't move. How could he go on now?

Chapter 9

Crowpaw's steps were heavy, his heart ached and he could barely walk. He leaned against Silverpool while Ivystone and Stonefoot carried Blacksky's body behind him. He couldn't bring himself to look at his father's dead body. The only images in his head were Blacksky's bleeding wound and the look on Elmpaw's face as he murdered Crowpaw's father. *I swear, Elmpaw. You will regret this day, the day you took my father away.*

Silverpool stayed at Crowpaw's side as they walked back to camp, Crowpaw relied on her for support. Part of him wanted to run away and never come back, he wanted to wake up and find that this had all just been a bad dream, but the pain in his heart and across his body reminded him that it was all too real.

MoonClan camp was nearing them, Crowpaw didn't want to face his mother. Would Riverlight even care? He closed his eyes, not ready to face her or what she would say to him. They neared camp and were greeted by Cloudwind, her eyes instantly going to Blacksky's body and filling with sadness.

"LichenClan denied crossing the border." Ashbird explained. "And then they attacked when I defend the Clan. Blacksky died in the fight."

"I want all of you to go get your wounds treated by Skyclaw." Cloudwind instructed, Crowpaw could feel her eyes on him but ignored them.

"Let's go get your wounds treated, Crowpaw." Silverpool said quietly into his ear. "Afterwards you can rest."

Crowpaw didn't complain or say anything, he just walked with Silverpool towards the medicine cat den.

"What in the name of StarClan happened?" Crowpaw winced as he heard the sharp voice of Riverlight. Crowpaw opened his eyes to

face his mother whose blue eyes burned with anger. "How did Blacksky die?"

"We fought with LichenClan--" Silverpool began explaining.

"I didn't ask *you*." Riverlight spat venom, Crowpaw knew her gaze was directed towards him. "Weren't you fighting with him? How could you let him die!?"

Her words cut into him, sharper than any claw could. Crowpaw winced and stepped back. *It's not my fault! I didn't kill him!* The thoughts tormented him, but he couldn't speak them.

"You killed your own father, Crowpaw! I know you never should've been born! Your sister died and now your father is dead!" Riverlight continued to yell, her voice trembling with anger.

"That is enough, Riverlight!" Silverpool stepped in front of Crowpaw, he closed his eyes and wanted to run. "This is your son you're talking to! A son you don't deserve!"

"You think I care what you think, Silverpool?" Riverlight hissed.

"No, and you shouldn't. You are a horrible she-cat and you don't deserve Crowpaw and you didn't deserve Blacksky! Blacksky died defending his son whom he loved more than anything in this forest!" Crowpaw looked up at Silverpool, shocked at the look in her eyes. "And if you won't accept Crowpaw as your son then I will!"

"You can have him! He only brings death wherever he goes! I want nothing to do with him!" Riverlight spat and turned away, stomping towards the warrior den with a cry of anger. Crowpaw trembled, feeling as if he had just fought a whole other battle.

"Come on, Crowpaw." Silverpool nudged him towards the medicine cat den. "I'm here for you."

Crowpaw sat in silence as Skyclaw treated his wounds, all the cats of MoonClan were giving him sympathy filled looks. Something he didn't want to see, their gazes hurt him even further, he wished he could just hide. Away from the hateful glare of his mother and the pitiful gazes of his Clanmates. *Why can't they just leave me be.*

Skyclaw finished working on Crowpaw's wounds and let him leave. Silverpool stayed with him, but Crowpaw just wanted to be alone. He lifted his head slightly, pain ripping through his heart as he saw Blacksky's body being prepared in the center of camp. From this distance it almost looked as if Blacksky was sleeping. Crowpaw's heart twisted. *Why must you make him look like that? He's dead, not sleeping.*

"Do you want to sit vigil?" Silverpool's voice was gentle in Crowpaw's ear, his claws scraped the ground.

"Of course I do." He withheld from hissing at his mentor, he knew that she was just trying to help but he didn't want help. Crowpaw and Silverpool walked over to Blacksky's body, he sat down and buried his nose into Blacksky's fur. His body was cold, Crowpaw longed for any sign of life or warmth. He could hear the sounds of cats gathering around Blacksky to hold vigil, but to Crowpaw it might as well have just been him and his father.

Crowpaw closed his eyes, trying to hold on to all memories of his father's face, voice and everything about it. He didn't want to say goodbye, he wanted to open his eyes and find that Blacksky really *was* asleep and tomorrow morning he would be awake and ready to take him hunting.

Pain took over Crowpaw's entire body, he would never go hunting with Blacksky again. He would never go swimming, or share prey with, or do anything with Blacksky again. His heart ached, the worst pain he had ever felt before.

He stayed by his father's side during the entire vigil, thinking of memories with his father. Playing with him as a kit, his first day as an apprentice. He thought of his father's laugh, the look in his eyes when he hunted. Every memory was painful, but Crowpaw vowed to never let them go. He would hold onto them for countless moons, until he saw his father again in StarClan.

I'll see you again, father. I promise you, and I will make sure that you're never forgotten. Crowpaw wished he could speak the words to Blacksky's face, but this was all he had. The sun was starting to rise, and Crowpaw would soon have to say goodbye to his father forever.

Crowpaw pressed against Blacksky's body, wishing for just a moment longer.

The time slowly crept by, and dawn approached. Crowpaw stood up, staring down at his father's body. "Goodbye." Crowpaw whispered, his voice almost silent. Sandnose, Runningpath and Haretooth began carrying his body and Crowpaw watched until they vanished from sight. When they were gone, he turned away trying to stop the pain in his heart. He wondered if it would ever go away.

"Crowpaw." He heard the voice of Silverpool once more, she was standing beside him. "I'm so sorry you had to lose your father." Her voice was tired and sad. "He was a wonderful warrior, but I am here for you." She touched her nose to Crowpaw's cheek, he could feel her body tremble. "I meant was said, if Riverlight won't be a mother to you, then I will." Her words went through Crowpaw's body, making him feel more relaxed. He looked up, meeting Silverpool's eyes. Inside the blue depths was the same look Blacksky used to give him, pure love.

Crowpaw pressed against Silverpool, closing his eyes and taking in her warmth. The warmth and love of a mother that he never had. "Thank you." He whimpered. He didn't know what he would do without Silverpool, she was all that he had left.

Crowpaw's sleep was restless, every time he closed his eyes he saw the death of Blacksky. Over and over again, he twitched and couldn't sleep at all. He lifted his head, it was nearly sunhigh outside but he had no plans of leaving his nest. Silverpool told him to rest, he didn't have to train for a few days while the two of them took the time to adjust to the death of Blacksky, but Crowpaw didn't know he would ever adjust. Crowpaw was the only one in the apprentice den, all the other apprentices were out.

He rested his head on his paws, closing his eyes and trying to force out all of his thoughts. Crowpaw wished he could slip into sleep without any dreams, just darkness. It would be more comforting than dealing with the images of his father that flashed in his mind. His wounds stung, but they didn't compare to the hollow, dull pain in his heart.

Crowpaw tried to imagine a future without Blacksky, without hearing his father's words of encouragement and a lifetime of hate filled glares from Riverlight. He didn't know what he would do at gatherings, if he ever had to see Elmpaw again...

The apprentice's amber eyes burned in his mind, filling him with anger. Crowpaw's claws tore at his nest. His head was a constant battle of anger and grief. Even his thoughts of Jaggedpaw had become twisted. *How can he be friends with that rat?* LichenClan were nothing but codebreakers. They crossed the border and killed an innocent warrior. *Elmpaw deserves the same fate as my father. Disgusting cat.* Crowpaw forced the thoughts of Elmpaw away, he'd rather think of his father than him.

After several more failed attempts at sleeping, Crowpaw decided to get up anyway. Though he knew he would just be met with sympathy gazes from his Clanmates. Crowpaw sat outside the apprentice den, looking around the camp. Outside the nursery, Featherdawn's kits were playing. Snakepelt and Thorntalon were having a friendly conversation over prey and the elders were sunning themselves outside their den.

How are they acting like nothing happened? Anger burned deep inside Crowpaw, he clawed the ground. He suddenly realized that everything about MoonClan felt unfamiliar to him, he looked around and had an overwhelming feeling that he didn't belong here. The cats around him felt like ghosts, part of him wondered if they even saw him. *Do I belong here?* Crowpaw questioned himself.

Movement caught Crowpaw's eye and he spotted Skyclaw walking to his den. Crowpaw suddenly remembered the medicine cat's conversation with Owlstar. *There's a cat who will have to go on a mission and this cat could save the Clan.* Crowpaw narrowed his eyes at the medicine cat, but his attention was drawn away when he heard the flapping of wings overhead.

He looked up and saw a large, black bird perched on a branch over the camp. *It's a crow.* Crowpaw realized, he looked back down at Skyclaw who had also heard the bird, he was staring at it with a sense of surprise in his eyes. Crowpaw turned back into the apprentice den, sitting in his nest while he thought about what he

just saw.

Maybe I don't belong here. He thought. *Was that a sign? A sign I'm supposed to leave?* Crowpaw didn't know why it *would* be a sign, it could've been just a simple crow. *A sign or not...maybe I could use this.*

Crowpaw looked out into the camp, a place where he felt he didn't belong. Was there something out there calling him, something more that MoonClan didn't have? A home?

Chapter 10

Crowpaw forced down his fresh-kill, he was only eating to make Silverpool happy. He didn't have much of an appetite at all in the few days that Blacksky had been dead. He couldn't sleep and he still wasn't back to training, he didn't think he would be able to focus on hunting or fighting. He didn't even want to step in the place where Blacksky died, he didn't want to do anything.

"Hi, Crowpaw." A soft voice spoke beside him. Crowpaw looked to his right to see Frostpaw and Icepaw standing beside him with gentle looks in their eyes. "We wondering if you were going to the gathering tonight, it will be our first." Frostpaw questioned.

Crowpaw looked back at his prey. "I don't think that's a good idea right now." He muttered, he could see that Frostpaw's feelings were hurt but he really didn't want to go.

"Why not?" Icepaw asked, concern lining her mew. "I figured it would be a good chance for you to get out of camp."

"Because," Crowpaw looked up. "If I have to see Elmpaw I can't promise I'll hold the truce."

Icepaw and Frostpaw shared a sad look. "Alright," Frostpaw put on a pleasant expression. "We'll tell you about it when we get back, okay? Just like you did for us."

"Alright." Crowpaw forced himself to look him until the two she-cats walked away. However, deep inside he knew that wouldn't be happening. Over the past few days Crowpaw had made up his mind, he was going to leave the Clan. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he felt in his heart that it was the right choice.

He wasn't going to tell anyone, not Frostpaw, Icepaw or even Silverpool. He couldn't bare the thought of telling her, he loved her and he knew that she loved him but he had to do this. He didn't even really know if it was because of what Skyclaw said, or if just

needed an excuse to leave. It wasn't the bravest thing to do, and Crowpaw didn't even know if we would survive a day on his own but he had to try.

I don't belong here anymore, I lost everything I had with Blacksky. Silverpool will be okay without me. Crowpaw told himself over and over again, half of him believed it and half of him didn't. He would leave tonight during the gathering while almost no cats were here. He knew Riverlight would be here, but he didn't care. *She'll probably celebrate the fact that I'm gone.* Bitterness clogged his throat but he swallowed that along with his prey.

He discarded the bones of his prey and returned to the apprentice den to rest until night time when the Clan was gone. The only other apprentice in there was Cedarpaw, sleeping off his night hunting patrol. *I won't see you or Amberpaw become a warrior.* Crowpaw thought, looking at the sleeping apprentice. *I'll never become a warrior.* Crowpaw looked at his paws, that thought was almost enough to make him stay, but Crowpaw knew he couldn't change his mind now.

The day went by slowly as usual, but as sure as the sun came, so did the moon. Crowpaw sat outside the apprentice den, watching the cats of MoonClan start to prepare to leave. He watched Silverpool walk over to him with concern in her eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure." Crowpaw nodded. "I'm just going to rest, but you have fun while you're gone. Make sure Frostpaw and Icepaw don't get into too much trouble." He forced a chuckle, he didn't want Silverpool to suspect that anything was wrong, he also wanted her to think that he was starting to feel better. *She deserves good memories.*

"Alright," Silverpool touched her nose to Crowpaw's forehead. "Get some rest, I'll be back soon." Crowpaw bid farewell to his mentor and watched the Clan disappear into the forest. Crowpaw waited for a while, almost second guessing himself, but he knew that was what he wanted.

It was nearly moonhigh and the cats that remained in camp were

starting to settle down. The only cat he see that was awake was Squirrelpelt who guarded the camp. Crowpaw stood up and looked around, if he was caught by her he would just say he was going to make dirt. Taking a deep breath, Crowpaw set for the back of camp. He was going away from the rest of the Clans and towards the twolegplace, he wondered what was beyond there. How many dangers awaited him.

He passed the nursery and cast a sad glanced towards it. *I'm sorry, Nightkit. You'll have to learn about night hunting when you become an apprentice.* As he stepped out of camp, he looked over his shoulder at MoonClan camp one last time. He turned away and stepped onto the moorland, not looking back again.

The moor was so beautiful and peaceful at night, Crowpaw breathed in the scents of MoonClan while he could, something he would hold onto forever. He kept a quick pace across the moorland, wanting to be out of MoonClan territory long before the gathering ended. Frostpaw and Icepaw would notice him missing immediately, he had to be far.

Crowpaw kept moving and soon saw bright lights in the distance, they didn't look like stars and glowed yellow. He narrowed his eyes, trying to discern what they were and eventually decided that must be a sign of twolegs. Gathering his confidence, Crowpaw pushed forward and continued with the very beginning of his journey.

Soon, a large wall came into view. It was made of strange, silver mesh that almost resembled cobweb. There was a large dip before the mesh that was filled with tall grass. Crowpaw scented the air before stepping into it, wondering if there was any dangers in there but didn't smell anything strange.

He crossed through the dip, the long grass scratching at his fur but he pushed through and shook a few burrs from his pelt. Crowpaw faced the tall mesh-like wall, placing a paw on it. It was cold and hard, he had no idea what it was or how to get past it. He walked along the edge of it, looking for a possible entrance.

Far along the edge of the wall, Crowpaw spotted a small hole in the ground that went underneath the wall. He dropped into a crouch,

wondering if he was small enough to fit. He dug a bit deeper into the hole, trying to make it easier for him and starting slipping underneath the mesh.

The ends of it were sharp, poking into his skin like thorns. He grit his teeth and forced his way through, the edges cutting into him. Crowpaw finally made it through, licking where he had been scratching and tasting a trace of blood. *If that thing is made by twolegs then they're just as stupid as I've heard.* He snorted and continued walking, officially out of MoonClan territory and into the twolegplace. There was a large patch of flat grass that led up to a dark stone path that reeked.

His stomach flipped as he realized what he was facing. Crowpaw had heard stories of thunderpaths, incredibly dangerous paths that allowed creatures known as monsters to travel freely. One hit from a monster could instantly kill a full grown cat, he would have to be careful. Crowpaw slowly approached the thunderpath, keeping his body low to the ground. He didn't know how monsters worked, or what they would do if he was spotted.

He reached the path and sniffed, almost choking on the rancid scent. He looked from side to side, hearing and seeing nothing. With a deep breath, Crowpaw braced himself. *I'll have to be quick.* He braced him and broke into a sprint across the thunderpath. The rough stone cut at his pads and the scent burned his lungs.

However, Crowpaw crossed without incident and reached another patch of grass. He stopped for just a moment to catch his breath. His throat was dry and he hoped that he would reach water soon. Crowpaw walked forward only to find himself at another silver mesh wall. This one, however looked older and had a large tear in it that Crowpaw easily walked through.

Crowpaw stepped off of grass and onto a damp, wet stone. He was nearly overwhelmed by strange scents. Some of them resembled cats and some reminded him of the thunderpath, but he had no idea what he was about to face. He was in unfamiliar territory and didn't know what he would find.

Crowpaw looked around, noticing large dark green formations that

smelled like crowfood. He held his breath and quickly passed them but there were more ahead. Crowpaw kept walking, keeping his nose peeled but part of him thought it wouldn't do him any good. In the distance, Crowpaw heard the gentle trickle of water. He quickly padded towards it, hoping for a stream or a river but founding something much weirder instead.

There was a large, hard tunnel that went up a stone wall. There was a slow trickle of water forming a puddle on the ground. He wasn't sure if it was smart for him to drink it, but he needed some way to quench his thirst. Crowpaw leaned his head down, lapping up from the pool of water. It was cold, but tasted of mud and rock. He made a face, but drank more to soothe his burning lungs.

When he finished, Crowpaw kept walking. He certainly didn't want to stay in the twoleg place, he wanted to be out in the wild. He walked along a series of stone walls that each had the crowfood holders and a few more with the strange tunnels that dripped water. He walked as far as he could, but his paws were starting to ache and exhaustion was also starting to take hold. He glanced up at the sky, it was nearly dawn. The apprentices would know he was gone by now, he had to make it farther in case some cats came looking for him.

He walked until dawn, not spotting anything he could sleep in until he found a pile of thin, den-like things. He sniffed them, they smelled damp and old but they would provide shelter. He stepped into the biggest one he could find, curled up into a tight ball and tried to force himself to sleep.

The twoleg place was filled with strange, terrifying noises. It wasn't the silence of the forest, right now he would even have Breezepaw's snoring over the noises he didn't know. He longed for having Icepaw and Frostpaw by his side. *I can't turn back now, I have to continue.* He had gotten used to sleeping on his own once and he could do it again.

After a long time, Crowpaw's exhaustion finally took hold and he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 11

Crowpaw woke with damp fur and sore muscles. The strange den he had slept in hadn't been very comfortable, but he was thankful that he didn't have any dreams. He stood up, stretching out his aching muscles and continued on his journey. He wanted to get out of the twolegplace, he hated everything about it and just hoped that it didn't go on forever. In his direct vision, Crowpaw could see nothing but twolegnests. Behind him was towards MoonClan and ahead of him was possible dangers, but he had no choice. He went forwards.

The stone continued to make his paws ache, he wished for grass but he had to deal with it for now. He kept his nose in the air, attempting to scent anything familiar. His stomach ached and he hoped to find prey, but didn't know what he would find in the twolegplace. He only knew that it probably wouldn't be rabbits or fish.

As Crowpaw walked through the twolegplace he saw his first glimpse of twolegs. The sight of them scared him and he ducked behind one of the crowfood holders. The twolegs stood tall, taller than any cat and only had fur on their heads. They wore strange colored pelts and spoke loud nonsense.

There was another sound that caused Crowpaw's fur to stand on edge. Near the twolegs was a dog with long black and white fur. It barked and jumped around the twolegs' feet. Crowpaw had heard stories of dogs, they would sometimes wander into MoonClan territory and were incredibly dangerous to cats.

The dog looked towards Crowpaw, causing him to tense and hide even more. *Did it scent me?* Crowpaw stood still until he heard the dog's barks faded away along with the sound of the twolegs. He poked his head out, trying to get a better look at where he was. There was grass ahead of him, but it looked wrong. There were several twoleg nests with wooden walls similar to the silver one he had crossed to get here.

In between the rows of the twolegnests was a thunderpath which made Crowpaw uneasy. That did not look like a place he wanted to go, he could hear more twolegs and more dogs. He spotted a cat sitting on one of the walls, but Crowpaw had no interest in talking to a kittypet, especially one on the other side of a thunderpath.

Maybe there's another way out of here. He wondered and turned away, back into the darker area with crowfood. He walked through along the stone path, much preferring aching paws to coming face to face with a monster or a dog. He made his way back to where had slept for the night, the boxes were up against a large stone wall, he wondered what was behind it. It was impossible to climb, but perhaps if he followed it he would be led somewhere.

Crowpaw did just that, following the wall and feeling much more comfortable in the shadows. His stomach was really starting to ache for food, he needed to find something to eat. Crowpaw could only hope that he would soon find a forest or river.

Crowpaw walked for a long time, his paws ached and hunger clawed at his belly. He had given up hope of finding prey in the twolegplace when he heard the scurry of tiny paws. He stopped and looked around. He narrowed his eyes, spotting movement in the shadows down a long alleyway. He recognized the creature as a rat, and didn't have much interest in eating it; but he needed the prey.

Crowpaw dropped into a crouch, keeping his eyes focused on the rat as he waited for it to come out of hiding. The rat snuck out from underneath a rock formation and sniffed the air. It's fur was dull and brown but it was fat. Crowpaw waited, he was used to hunting rabbits but Silverpool had given him a quick lesson on catching mice, surely a rat wouldn't be too hard to catch.

The rat moved forward, twitching it's tiny pink nose and ears. Crowpaw waited until it was close enough to him and he leapt forward, claws striking the rat's spine. He bit into its neck and it killed it quickly. Crowpaw picked up his rat and carried it to a more secluded area to eat. He bit into the rat, the taste slightly bothering but him his stomach was grateful for the food. He ate it in a few quick bites, thankful that the ache of hunger had started to ease.

He left the remains and continued on, feeling more energized now that he had eaten. Crowpaw continued to follow the wall, feeling hopeful when he heard the sounds of birds overhead. *Birds means trees.* He told himself and quickened his pace.

In the distance he could see a gap in the wall, the wall was separated by a large thunderpath. However, Crowpaw quickened his pace, he wanted to see what was on the other side of the wall. Beyond the thunderpath on either side was a vast, empty field. In the distance Crowpaw could see the buildup of trees into a forest. Excitement quickened his heartbeat, he would finally be free of the twolegplace.

He reached the edge of the thunderpath, the scent once against burning his nose. To his right, he heard a terrifying, growling side. He looked and saw a monster racing up the thunderpath. He jumped back in alarm as the creature tore past, leaving Crowpaw breathless. *That thing could kill me instantly!* He realized, trying to calm his erratic breathing. *But I have to cross.* He looked once more for any monsters coming before taking a moment to dash across the thunderpath.

When he reached the other side safely he walked past the wall and into the field. He breathed in the fresh air, away from the twolegplace. He could smell grass and trees, which was much better than the foul and bitter scents of the twolegplace. Crowpaw started walking through the field, the grass much taller than what he was used to. It went up to his belly, completely covering his legs.

He pushed his way through the grass, hoping to reach the forest before sundown. Crowpaw's legs were starting to ache and thirst was yet again a problem, he hadn't drank anything since the puddle on the stones in the twolegplace, but he had hopes that now he was in the wilderness, he would find a stream.

The grass was brittle and scratched as his legs, but Crowpaw felt relieved having open skies to breathe, the twolegplace was crowded but this was peaceful and more like home. *Or my old home.* The thought brought his mood down slightly, but he knew that he couldn't turn back now.

Crowpaw pressed on, his heart skipping a beat when he heard the trickle of a stream. He nearly broke into a sprint, following the sound of the water. It soon came into view, a tiny stream trickling down a slope towards the twolegplace. Crowpaw sent a prayer to StarClan and bent down to drink the water. It was icy cold and fresh, invigorating him with energy.

"Crowpaw!" Crowpaw's entire body went stiff. *Who knows my name out here? Who found me?* He turned away from the stream, trying to see who was calling his name. He saw across the field, the shimmering silver tabby pelt of Silverpool.

No! How did she find me? Crowpaw looked towards the forest, thinking of breaking into a run but he knew he could never outrun, Silverpool. He also couldn't bring himself to do that to her so he let his mentor approach. He lowered his head as she neared him, her breaths were rapid and she sounded exhausted. "Crowpaw!" She exclaimed once more. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing out here?" She pressed against Crowpaw and pulled him close, Crowpaw couldn't help but be grateful for her in that moment. He breathed in the familiar scent of her and MoonClan.

After a moment she stepped back, her eyes were a flurry of emotions. Anger, pain, love and disbelief. "Why did you run away?" She demanded, her voice nearly cracking.

"I had to." Crowpaw replied. "I needed to leave MoonClan."

"Why would you ever think that?" She raised her voice. "You belong with us! You're a MoonClan cat."

"I don't know!" Crowpaw lied, Silverpool winced slightly. "Something is pulling me out here, and I need to go." He dropped his head. "I overheard Skyclaw talking with Owlstar that a cat needs to leave the Clan and that they could save it."

"Then let them send a warrior! You're just an apprentice!" Silverpool cried. "This is not your responsibility!"

"I think it is, Silverpool. " Crowpaw pleased. "I saw a crow over the camp, Skyclaw saw it too, and it flew this way. I think this is what

I'm supposed to do." He then added with a stern tone. "I'm not going back."

Silverpool dropped her head, looking defeated. "I'm sorry you have to deal with everything, Riverlight being the way she is and Blacksky dying but you can't just run from your problems, Crowpaw."

"I'm not running!" Crowpaw argued. "I told you, I'm doing this for the Clan. You can't stop me." He turned back towards the stream. There was a moment of silence between the two of them, Crowpaw hated himself for yelling at Silverpool the way he did, but he couldn't go back to MoonClan now.

"If you're not going back to MoonClan then I'm coming with you." Crowpaw turned on his paws, staring at Silverpool in shock.

"What?" His jaw dropped.

"You're just an apprentice, barely older than six moons. You need help out here, you need me." Silverpool's voice was strict. "I'm not letting you make this journey alone."

"But--" SIlverpool cut him off sharply.

"But nothing, Crowpaw. I promised that I would take care of you and I'm going to. I don't know if I could live everyday wondering if you're going to come back to us or not. You may not be my son but I love you like one, Crowpaw. I told you that the day your father died."

Crowpaw dropped his head, he knew that he couldn't convince Silverpool otherwise. Now he had no choice but to let her accompany him. "Okay." He agreed, turning away once more.

Silverpool stood beside him, looking at the stream. "Where are you doing anyway?" She questioned.

"I don't know." Crowpaw shrugged, turning his gaze towards the distant forest. "The forest I think I'm just walking until I find a sign."

Silverpool nodded. "Then the forest it is." She leaned down, lapping

up some water and rested her gaze on Crowpaw. "Let's go." She took the lead, causing Crowpaw to fall in behind her. His tail dragged across the ground and he stared at his paws. *It wasn't supposed to be this way. You weren't supposed to join me, you have a life back at MoonClan, I don't.* He wanted to tell her that so badly, but remained silent.

After a while of walking Crowpaw finally spoke. "How did you find me, anyway?"

"I didn't start looking until this morning. I followed your scent for a while, it went to the thunderpath and I assumed you crossed it, so I did as well. I then found your scent all over a stack of small dens. It was hard to keep track of it throughout the twoleg place but I found the remains of a rat and assumed it was yours." Silverpool explained.

Crowpaw hissed at himself for being so careless, he should've covered his scent more. Silverpool wouldn't have been able to find him otherwise. He sighed and went silent once more. The forest was much farther than he thought and they walked for a long time. When the sun started to fall, Silverpool stopped walking and turned to face Crowpaw.

"We should eat and rest for the night, we don't want to be caught out at night. We'll have to find somewhere to sleep thought." She looked around. "The forest isn't too far, maybe we can find a den."

The two pushed on farther towards the forest, Crowpaw wasn't keeping much of an eye out for anything. He felt defeated and guilty. He dragged Silverpool out here into the dangerous unknown, he wouldn't be able to live with himself if anything happened to her because of him.

"Over here!" Silverpool's voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he looked towards her as she ran over to something. It was a burrow in the ground. "It looks like it could be an old badger or fox den, but the scent is long gone. We should be safe here." Silverpool looked at him. "You rest and I'll go find us some prey."

Crowpaw didn't argue, he didn't have the strength to. He stepped

inside the den, feeling a pang of familiarity. It reminded him of the dens in MoonClan, which were almost all old burrows. He sat down inside, watching the sky slowly turn from night to day. Silverpool returned quickly with two mice hanging from her mouth. She set one down in front of Crowpaw and sat down beside him.

"I know it's not fish, but it's something to keep us going." Silverpool mewed, taking a bite of her own mouse.

"Thank you." Crowpaw said quietly, staring at his own mouse. He took a tiny bite and looked up at his mentor. "Thank you for taking care of me, and thank you for making sure I was okay."

"Of course, Crowpaw." Silverpool nuzzled him. "I will always take care of you." She nuzzled him, sending pain deeper into his heart as he thought about what he was soon going to do.

The two of them finished their prey in silence before settling down to sleep for the night. Crowpaw slept next to Silverpool, wanting to share as much of her warmth as he could. Silverpool fell asleep quickly but he couldn't find the same peace to do so.

He waited a long time, listening to the sound of Silverpool's gentle breathing while he could. He closed his eyes, making sure to hold onto this moment forever. He stood up as silently as he could, looking over his mentor's sleeping form. He silently exited the den, making sure to do one more thing.

In the field, he hunted down a mouse and left in the den, so Silverpool would see it when she woke up. "I'm sorry to do this to you again." His voice was nearly silent, and cracked with emotion. Silverpool's ears twitched but she didn't wake up. "I hope you go back home, you deserve to be happy." He turned out of the den, not looking back as pain tore his heart. *I don't have to do this, I can let her come with me.* He closed his eyes, forcing himself not to turn back. *But she needs to go home, this is my journey and my journey alone.*

This time, Crowpaw had to hide his scent better. He walked along, finding another part of the stream that was especially muddy. He dropped into the mud and coated himself in it, he hated the feeling

but it was for the better. Crowpaw looked towards the forest, this time he had to put a lot of distance between him and Silverpool, no matter how much he hated it.

After a quick drink from the stream, Crowpaw broke off into a sprint. He ran as fast as he could. *I'm so sorry, Silverpool. Please forgive me!* He cried silently as he ran even farther. Crowpaw pushed himself as hard as possible, the forest nearing him at a rapid pace. He broke through the trees, suddenly the sky was hidden from him and the field was fading from sight, and yet Crowpaw kept running.

He ran as hard as could, nearly tripping over rocks and roots but still not stopping. His muscles ached and his lungs screamed for him to stop. Finally, Crowpaw couldn't run any farther. He skidded to a stop, collapsing to the ground and gasping for air. His lungs and sides ached. Once he managed to catch his breath, he looked around. There was nothing but forest as far as his eyes could see.

I'm still not far enough. Crowpaw told himself, forcing his sore legs to stand. He wasn't going to run anymore, but he would continue ahead. Crowpaw walked through the trees with no sense of where he was going, he just walked.

Crowpaw spotted a patch of wild garlic a few taillengths away from him, not too far from a river. Crowpaw approached the river, lapping up several mouthfuls to try and soothe his lungs and stepping inside to wash the mud off. The water was freezing at bit at his skin, but he bore through it, slipping under the surface to get all the mud he could off his pelt.

After he was clean, Crowpaw went up the wild garlic and rolled around in it, until he could smell the garlic radiating off his pelt. He smelled horrible but it would deter Silverpool if she did manage to follow him this far.

Crowpaw followed the river, soon spotting a small waterfall that lead a rocky outcrop. He narrowed his eyes, trying to get a better look. The outcrop would provide a solid den for the night and it was well hidden. He walked through the river once more, watching his step on the rocks.

He jumped from the river to the den. He sniffed the air, only smelling wet rock and no other animals. Crowpaw slipped into the tiny entrance of the ten, he would sleep here for the night and continue tomorrow. He only hoped that Silverpool wouldn't try and follow him again. He curled into a ball, painfully longing for Silverpool but forcing himself into sleep.

Chapter 12

Crowpaw killed his mouse quickly and cleanly. He had become quite accustomed to hunting mice and squirrels, even though he missed the taste of rabbit and fish. The nearby river wasn't as full of fish as the river back in MoonClan, but he would catch one from time to time. It had been almost half a moon since Crowpaw left Silverpool at their makeshift den and he hadn't seen any sign of her since.

He prayed that she didn't come looking for him and instead went back to MoonClan where she was safer. Crowpaw hadn't moved on from his riverside den and was instead living there for the time being. He wasn't sure if he would stay there forever, he didn't think so but for now it was safe and he had plenty of prey.

He had gathered moss to make it more comfortable, and he was starting to get used to living on his own. Crowpaw missed Frostpaw, Icepaw and SIlverpool but knew this was a better place for him. For now, this was his new home.

He hadn't found any sign of other cats, and only the faint trace of fox. As far as he knew, he was alone in this forest. Some days the pangs of loneliness were almost too much to bare, but other days he felt free. He could hunt whenever he wanted and there were no borders surrounding him. He could go wherever he wanted and hunt anything he wanted. He figured he would move on one day, but now he felt safe in his small den.

Crowpaw ate his mouse quickly, burying the remains and going to the river for a drink. This river is what made the place almost feel like a home, he could fall asleep to the rushing water and drink fresh water whenever he needed. He could also swim, nothing relaxed him more than getting his fur wet.

Crowpaw rested on the bank of the river, letting the water splash onto him. The greenleaf sun was bearing down on him, making everything in the forest hot. Another reason he was so grateful for

the river. With the season in full swing, he was afraid to leave the river for fear of not finding another one for a while. He would at least stay here for greenleaf.

It had been nearly a moon since Blacksky's death and Crowpaw still felt the pain of his loss. He wondered if Blacksky approved of what he was doing, or even if Blacksky could see him from here. Did StarClan walk the entire sky? Or just over the Clan's territories?

Crowpaw found that he had dozed off by the river, enjoying the cool river against the sun warming up his fur. When he woke up the sun was starting to fall and his belly rumbled. He decided for a quick hunt, then he would settle down in his nest. He may have not faced any dangers in this forest, but he didn't like sticking around at night to try and find any.

Crowpaw stalked through the forest, keeping his nose and eyes peeled for any sign of prey. He found that the hardest prey to catch in the forest were squirrels, so he tried to stick to mice most of the time. Sometimes he would come across the occasional bird but those were also difficult to catch.

Crowpaw spotted a mouse at the base of a tree, nibbling contently on beech seeds. Crowpaw dropped into a crouch, hiding in a patch of long grass and keeping his paw steps silent. He waited for the mouse to turn it's back on Crowpaw when he jumped in to kill it. He killed it with a swift bite to the next and picked it up, carrying it back to his den. The walk to this den was slightly dangerous, but he had mastered the path without fear. He settled down in his moss nest and ate his mouse quickly.

Crowpaw settled down in his nest, letting his mind wander. He wondered how MoonClan was doing. Was Silverpool okay without him? Would she get a new apprentice? How was Frostpaw and Icepaw's training going? Were they happy or did they miss him? Did Riverlight even notice he was gone? Did she miss him at all? Crowpaw couldn't imagine his mother caring about him in any way. He let out a sigh, feeling a dull gnawing of homesickness. He closed his eyes, forcing the thoughts away and slipped into a silent sleep.

Crowpaw woke up to splashing and squeals close to his den. He

lifted his head, fur standing on edge. Who was so close to his den? He poked his head outside the stone den, spotting a group of twolegs playing near the river. His fur bristled and slipped back into his den. Why were twolegs here? Perhaps his forest wasn't as safe as he thought.

He peered outside once more, seeing four fully grown twolegs and three smaller twoleg kits. The older twolegs had weird sticks that they held out to the water, laughing and putting strange things up to their mouths. The kits played in the water, splashing each other and making headache-inducing noises.

They couldn't see him from where he was, but if Crowpaw left his den then he would be spotted for sure. He would stay in his den until they left, which would hopefully be soon. Crowpaw sat in his nest, listening to the loud twolegs. He wondered what possible use twolegs could have for a river, but it seemed like the kits enjoyed playing in the river just as much as he did. *I guess they're not so weird then, they like swimming more than the other Clans.*

Crowpaw waited, sitting silently in his den for a long while. He tensed whenever the sounds grew closer, but none of the twolegs came to his den. He wished for them to leave, his stomach ached for food and he wanted to get out and stretch his legs. He kept a close eye on the sky, watching the sun slowly fall and yet the twolegs remained. Soon the sounds of the kits playing in water stopped, but he could still hear them.

Crowpaw looked out the cave entrance once more, dusk was upon the forest and the twolegs were now sitting on strange things made from colorful pelts. Crowpaw's jaw dropped when he saw that they were around a small fire. *Twolegs are so stupid! They're going to burn down the forest!*

The twolegs didn't seem scared of the fire, however. They held out sticks with white things on the end of them, laughing and pointing at the fire whenever one of the white things would fall off. They would also eat the white things, Crowpaw felt himself nearly gag at the sight of them. They looked mushy and sticky, he had no idea what they could be and he had no intention of finding out.

Crowpaw slipped back into the den, seeing the faint glow of the fire and the water's surface. He laid down, listening to the twolegs and praying to StarClan that they wouldn't stay for much longer.

He was nearly asleep when he heard shuffling sounds and the twolegs talking louder. He lifted his head and looked outside. The twolegs were gathering up their strange nests and walking back towards the twolegplace. Crowpaw waited for a long while, waiting for them to come back but they never did.

Finally, he crept out of his den and across the river. The area reeked of twolegs and fire, he looked at where they had their small fire and made sure it wasn't still burning. He wrinkled his nose and moved deeper into the forest. He was a little nervous to be hunting at night, but he would stay on high alert.

He sniffed the air, finally far enough away from the river to smell something other twolegs and fire. He quickly caught the scent of mouse and tracked it down. The mouse was hiding in a patch of ferns, but visible enough for Crowpaw. He crouched down and quickly attacked, killing his prey with ease. As he killed it he heard a haunting sound above him, nearly causing him to jump out of his own fur.

He looked up, seeing glittering eyes in the tree above. He narrowed his eyes, able to make out the shape of an owl. His fur stood on edge for a second before he realized the owl wasn't that big, and wouldn't be able to do a thing to him. It would want the mouse that he just caught, however. He ate the prey quickly before the owl could react and started to make his way back to his den.

The rancid scent of fire was still heavy in the air near his, but he would have to deal with it for now. He stopped to take a quick drink from the river before going back to his den and laying down in his nest. Most of his days were like this, hunting and resting but he didn't have much else to do. At least he didn't spend most days trapped in his nest because twolegs decided to light fires and play in the river. He couldn't help but worry that they would keep coming back, and if that happened, he would have to find a new place to live. He couldn't risk one of them finding him or bringing a dog.

Crowpaw would wait and see what happened, seeing if any twolegs would return and then he would decide if he would stay or leave. For now, he just wanted peace, dozing off to the sound of the river outside of his den and dreaming of hunting with his father.

Chapter 13

The twolegs had returned, and this time it was exactly what Crowpaw feared. There were many more of them and they not only brought dogs but monsters as well. Crowpaw didn't even dare poke his head out of his den, but the sounds of barking and the roar of the monsters that approached had woken him up. He was terrified to even move for fear that a dog would scent him. From what he could hear there was more than one dog as well. He hoped that nothing would come out to his den and he would be safe until they left.

It had been almost half a moon since the first twolegs showed up and he was hoping that they would never come back, he had been sorely mistaken. *I should've left when they first showed up. I could be in a lot of danger here.* He thought, trying to hide as far in the back of his den as he could.

Crowpaw remained still for a long time, his limbs starting to ache but the sound of the twolegs and their dogs didn't go away. He flattened his ears and tensed at every bark that sounded near him. He closed yes eyes, praying to StarClan that they wouldn't find him. The last time the twolegs came here, they didn't wander near his den but these twolegs were different.

Crowpaw heard splashing dangerously close to his den, followed by the sharp sound of barking. Crowpaw's heart stopped as the splashing grew closer, he could see the shadow of a dog outside his den. The twolegs shouted, but the dog didn't respond to them. Blood turned to ice as a black and white spotted dog head peered into Crowpaw's den.

Crowpaw unsheathed his claws and hissed at the dog. The dog started barking furiously it's paws scraping at the stone den. Crowpaw's heart pounded in his chest, he had to run. He could hear more dogs running towards him. Taking a deep breath, Crowpaw ran forward. His claws raked across the dog's big black nose, drawing blood. The dog let out a yelp and stumbled backwards into

the water, tripping over its own big, clumsy paws.

Crowpaw jumped out of the den, past the dog and landed awkwardly on a stone in the river. His paws nearly slipped, but Crowpaw leaped once more. He landed on the bank of the river and took off running as fast as possible. He could hear barking and the twolegs' confused shouting but he didn't look back.

Crowpaw ducked into the trees, terrified that the dogs had given chase and for a while he could hear distant barking. The barking, however, soon faded and the only sound was his own exhausted breathing. He stopped running to take a breath and sit down, his heart still raced but he managed to relax slightly.

Crowpaw looked around, he was still in the forest but he was quite far from his den. *I can't go back there.* He dropped his head. *Too many twolegs.* Crowpaw stood up, wondering if he should stay in this forest at all. There could be twolegs all throughout the forest. *It's time to move on.* He let out a quiet sigh and looked towards the river, thankful that it travelled through the whole forest. *As long as I can see the river I have water.*

Crowpaw caught a quick mouse before moving ahead, not wanting to travel on an empty stomach. Not knowing where he was going, or what was beyond the forest: Crowpaw pushed forward.

He wondered how big the forest was, was there another twolegplace past it? Or another field? Crowpaw let the questions wander and kept walking. The entire time he had been gone from MoonClan, he hadn't found another cat with the exception of the kittypet he saw and Silverpool. His heart ached slightly for someone to talk to, but he wasn't going to go looking. If there were cats around here, he wouldn't know how to act around them or even how they would act around here. He couldn't imagine there being any Clan cats out here, just kittypets, rogues and loners. He certainly hoped that he would find a cat before he found another dog.

Crowpaw walked until dusk, still nothing but forest ahead of him. As usual, he felt as if he was the only one in the forest but after his encounter with twolegs and dogs, he knew better than to believe

that. He needed a safe place to sleep for the night, he was too scared to travel through the forest at night and exhaustion was quickly taking its.

After searching for a while, Crowpaw found an old tree. Its roots torn out of the ground like claws, making a small den underneath the tree. Crowpaw gave it a sniff, only finding the scent of mud and wood. He climbed inside, the feeling of the damp mud was cooling, but also uncomfortable. He settled down to sleep, but it didn't come easily.

For a while, Crowpaw was starting to feel at home in his den, but part of him knew that it wouldn't last. Would he ever find a new, permanent home? Or would he forever be wandering? Moving from place to place without sustaining a forever home? Crowpaw really hoped he would find a new home, a place where he truly belonged. He closed his eyes, his mind floating back to MoonClan.

How were they? It was greenleaf, prey must be running well and the rivers full of fish. What did Owlstar say about him at the gathering? Would he say anything at all, or just pretend that everything was alright? Crowpaw had been on his own for about a moon, he remembered looking up at the full moon, wondering how the gathering went. It would've been his third gathering, it was hard to believe that he had already been gone for so long.

Maybe MoonClan had forgotten about him altogether. That thought was Crowpaw's final before he fell asleep. His dreams were weak, he saw shimmering stars and strange tortoiseshell she-cat that he had never seen before. She had stars in her fur and shimmering green eyes, and she looked scared.

She was gone quicker than she appeared when Crowpaw opened his eyes and found the sun shining into his den. It was nearly sunhigh and Crowpaw could already feel the powerful heat of greenleaf, today was going to be a very hot day. He would have to stick by the river, he just hoped there would be no twolegs.

Crowpaw climbed out of his nest, shaking dry bits of mud out of his pelt and breathing in the warm air. The sun's rays burned into his black fur, he had a feeling today would be a long, exhausting day of

travel. He had to do it though, there was more beyond this forest that he needed to see.

Crowpaw found and caught a mouse to eat before walking to the river. He took a heavy drink, cooling him down and filling him with energy for today's walk. Crowpaw walked alongside the bank, enjoy the soft, cool sand between his toes. He was grateful for this river every day that he lived beside it. He just hoped that it went on for a long time.

Crowpaw walked, the sweltering heat making each paw step harder than the last. He had to stop very often to soothe his dry mouth. This was the hottest day he had experienced in his journey, and he longed to rest but refused to without making significant progress. He was on a mission.

The sun did not give out, beaming down powerful heat and making every pawstep feel much heavier. When he felt like he could no longer move forward, Crowpaw would climb into the cold river and cool his body for a few moments, then continue forward. He kept eyeing the sky, looking for any signs of dusk but this felt like the longest day of his life.

Crowpaw's hopes were slightly lifted when the trees of the forest began to thin out, he was reaching the end of it. Crowpaw picked up his pace, the sun was starting to fall and he was almost out of the forest.

Finally, the trees stopped and opened up to a large field, similar to the one on the other side. However, he could see twolegnests in the distance. This twolegplace didn't seem as big as the other one, there were no thunderpaths and the nests were scattered about. Crowpaw walked through the field, still keeping his eye on the river which still flowed strong.

Crowpaw neared one of the twolegnests, staying low to the ground and keeping a nose out for any sign of dogs. There was a flurry of scents, none of them dog, and most of them Crowpaw didn't recognize. The only one he did, was a cat.

The cat scent was strong, he assumed that there was a kittypet who

lived around here. The sun was falling and the world around Crowpaw was growing darker, he would have to find shelter soon. The heat was no longer an issue, but he didn't want to sleep in the open.

Crowpaw looked around, there were several twolegnests. One of them was large and the others were smaller. Behind the large twoleg nest was a weird pen with strange animals. They were large and brown, making strange noises and eating grass. Their feet were hard and solid. *That could break a cat's spine.* Crowpaw realized with a chill.

"Hey there stranger." An unexpected voice caused Crowpaw to jump and spin around, claws extended. He found himself face to face with a sleek, black she-cat. Her eyes were a shocking icy blue. They weren't malicious, just curious. The she-cat's tail twitched with interest. "Didn't mean to scare you." She dipped her head. "I just don't see many cats around here. You lost?"

"Um," Crowpaw shuffled his paws awkwardly. Was he lost? "Not really, just wandering." He replied.

"Where'd you come from? I didn't know that cats lived in that forest. It's a popular place for housefolk in greenleaf." The she-cat looked over her shoulder at the forest where Crowpaw had come from.

So I've learned. He twitched his ears. "No, I came from beyond the forest. I've been travelling for over a moon."

"Wow." The she-cat looked impressed. "Sounds like you've been on quite the journey. You're pretty brave to travel all that way."

"Thanks." Crowpaw looked away, feeling awkward.

"Do you have a place to sleep tonight? It's getting late and it's pretty dangerous around here at night. You don't want to be caught out."

"I don't have a place yet, but I'm sure I'll find one." Crowpaw explained.

"Well, if you want you could stay here." The kittypet motioned

towards a red twoleg nest.

"Sorry," Crowpaw stepped back. "I have no interest in staying with twolegs." The thought of it nearly made him sick.

"Twolegs, huh?" The she-cat chuckled. "Well you won't be staying with "twolegs", you'll be staying in a barn. It's full of mice and my housefolk don't go in there often. You'll have a nice, comfortable place to sleep with plenty of food. You don't have to if you don't want to but I'd feel bad if I didn't offer."

The thought of food and a comfortable place to sleep was nearly enough to convince Crowpaw right then and there. "Well--" He stuttered. "Can I see it first?"

The she-cat nodded. "Of course, follow me." She began leading him towards the twoleg nest. "So, what's your name?"

"Crowpaw." He replied, looking around and seeing other strange animals.

"Weird name." The she-cat said quietly, with a laugh. "My name is Sheba. It's nice to meet you."

"You as well." Sheba walked with confidence towards the barn, seemingly not aware of the weird animals that made Crowpaw want to turn and run.

"Here we are." Sheba pushed open the entrance to the barn with her head. When Crowpaw stepped in he could smell a strong scent of mouse. The floor was covered in hay, which looked inviting to sleep in. "You can stay here for as long as you'd like. If you want to leave the moment you wake up you're welcome to do so as well." Sheba looked at Crowpaw, waiting for his answer.

"I'll stay," He replied. "For tonight at least." He stepped inside, the scent of mouse making his mouth water. "Thank you." He dipped his respectfully.

"My pleasure, Crowpaw." Sheba purred. "I always like to help cats in need. If you need anything else you can find me in my house." She turned away, leaving Crowpaw by himself in the barn. He quickly

started hunting, catching enough mice to fill his belly. It was the most full he had been since he started on his journey.

Crowpaw made himself a nest in the hay, finding it quite comfortable even if it was slightly pokey. He closed his eyes, find it slightly hard to sleep with all the strange sounds of the animals all around him, but after his exhausting trek in the heat, he welcomed sleep.

Chapter 14

The sound of strange voices woke Crowpaw. He opened his sleep-heavy eyes and noticed movement outside of the barn and they certainly weren't cat. *Twolegs!* Crowpaw scrambled up in alarm as the twolegs started to enter the barn. He jumped backwards, falling into a patch of hay. He quickly covered himself and ducked low, keeping his breathing nearly silent.

Through strands of hay, Crowpaw could see the twolegs walking over to the opposite wall. Talking in their weird language and pointing to something. Crowpaw saw movement at their feet, it was Sheba. She brushed up against their legs and meowed at them. The twolegs reached down with their huge, hairless paws to pet her. *How can she stand that?* Crowpaw wondered.

He waited in the hay for a long while, waiting for the twolegs to leave. When they finally did, Sheba remained and looked around the barn. "You still here, Crowpaw?" She asked with a raised voice.

Crowpaw dug his way out of the hay, shaking his pelt free of the stuff. He faced with Sheba with slight annoyance. "I thought you said that the twolegs don't come in here often."

"They don't." Sheba replied, licking her forepaw. "But I guess today was the exception. They wouldn't have done anything if they saw you."

"Regardless," Crowpaw flicked his tail. "I'd rather stay as far away from twolegs as possible."

Sheba rolled her eyes. "They're not *that* bad. All you wild cats think they're the worst thing ever, but they take care of me."

Crowpaw felt slightly guilty. "Well, it's not the life for me. I'm sure they treat you well, but I like living in the wild."

Sheba shrugged. "Understandable."

"So," Crowpaw looked around. "What's beyond this twolegplace, anything?" He questioned.

"I don't really travel that far, but from what I've heard from other travellers; there's a large section of moorland. If you're going that way, be careful. It gets pretty windy up there. Beyond that is another twolegplace, which is relatively small. I used to live there actually."

"Really?" Crowpaw didn't know that kittypets traveled. "How'd you get here?"

"I was born over there." Sheba replied. "When a she-cat has kits, they stay with their mother for a while but at about five moons old the twolegs give the kits to other twolegs."

"That's horrible." Crowpaw stepped back in shock. How could they take kits away from their mothers? That was a whole moon before kits were allowed to become apprentices.

Sheba shrugged. "It's how it works. I barely remember my mother and I have no idea where my sister ended up. She could have a new name for all I know"

Crowpaw looked at his paws. He supposed he didn't really know what it was like to have a mother who cared or even siblings. "I guess that's understandable." He looked away, feeling Sheba's eyes on him. "Either way," He shook his head. "I should go, I want to get as far as I can today." He stood up, dipping his head at Sheba. "Thank you for letting me stay here."

"My pleasure, Crowpaw." Sheba purred, dipping her head in return. "If you ever come back this way, you're welcome to stay again.

"Thank you." Crowpaw's heart felt warmed. He felt as if he had actually made a friend, even if he didn't see Sheba again he would remember her kindness. If he ever *did* come back this way, then she would definitely be a pleasant sight. Crowpaw started for the barn's entrance, walking past Sheba.

"Before you go, make sure you are aware of coyotes. They're big,

dog-like animals. They're bigger than foxes and they're dangerous and fast." Sheba warned.

"I'll be on the lookout." Crowpaw nodded, wondering what a coyote even looked like. Shaking the image away, Crowpaw exited the barn and walked around Sheba's twoleg nest. He could see the beginnings of the moor past all the twoleg buildings.

He cast one final look at the barn before continuing his journey. With a slight skip in his step, Crowpaw started walking. His eyes scanned the land for the river, spying it a few foxlengths away. However, the sun wasn't as hot today and he prayed to StarClan that it would stay like that for the remainder of his journey.

Crowpaw passed other twoleg buildings, wondering how many of them belonged to Sheba's twolegs. However, the scent of her was long gone and he could only smell the strange animals and twolegs. He caught a scent of dog, but it was stale and he heard no barking. He could also hear the distant roar of a monster, but didn't see anything nearby. He felt relatively safe, but made sure to keep his guard up.

It didn't take Crowpaw long to reach the moorland, it was sunhigh by the time he did and the sun was starting to get hotter. He looked for the river, it was veering off farther and farther away from him. Crowpaw looked up at the sky, it was speckled with pale gray clouds. *It might rain. That should help with the heat, I'll be fine until I find another water source.* Crowpaw told himself and continued.

When Crowpaw stepped onto the moorland, he was nearly overwhelmed with scents of home. He could smell heather and rabbits. The only thing missing was the scent of MoonClan. Crowpaw wondered if he could make a new home on this moor, maybe there were dens similar to the ones in MoonClan camp. Crowpaw could only hope at this point.

He walked the moorland, more clouds filling the sky and anxiety filling Crowpaw's chest. He didn't want to be caught in a storm, but he had only just started his journey. *I could find shelter and wait out the storm, and walk through the night if I have to.* He suddenly remembered Sheba's warning about travelling at night and how

dangerous it was.

I don't want to make small amounts of progress. Crowpaw thought. *I'll just have to risk it.* Crowpaw kept going, quickening his pace. He hoped to make it as far as possible before the storm but to also find shelter.

The skies grew darker and Crowpaw's steps faster. The heat was dying down and he could smell rain on the air. *It's not far off.* He looked up at the sky, the dark clouds were ominous overhead. It wasn't long before Crowpaw felt drops of cold water hit his fur, and there wasn't any shelter in sight.

Crowpaw kept his eyes peeled for any dens or burrows, finding nothing but flat land. Cursing, he continued. The rain slowly fell faster, Crowpaw was anxious for any shelter. He wished he would've known about the storm, he would've stayed with Sheba longer.

The rain was falling steadily, soaking Crowpaw to the bone. He needed shelter, or he would be caught in the middle of the storm. The thunder rumbling in the distance sent chills down Crowpaw's spine. He was going to be stuck in the middle of a thunderstorm and there was nothing he could do about it.

Lightning lit up the sky, followed quickly by a clap of thunder and more rain. It was soon pouring onto Crowpaw, turning the dirt to mud and making his fur cling to his body. Crowpaw broke into a run, unable to see well due to the heavy rain. He rain harder, kicking up mud in the process. *There has to be shelter somewhere!* Crowpaw wailed silently, he was now shivering and soaked.

Crowpaw stopped running, taking a moment to catch his breath in the pouring rain. Lightning flashed around him and thunder cracked, he was stuck. Crowpaw pushed forward, sitting still would do him no good. *Good thing it's greenleaf. Last thing I need is a cold.* Crowpaw snorted and kept walking in the rain.

Crowpaw kept walking. The rain kept falling. He found himself often trekking through thick mud, sticking to his legs and making the walk even more uncomfortable. He couldn't tell how long he

had been walking through the clouds, but he definitely felt like it was getting darker. *At least I didn't waste away the day. I'm definitely moving slower, though.*

Crowpaw's fur felt heavy and his legs were clogged with mud. Through the rain, Crowpaw could see a den-like structure in the distance. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see it clearer. He quickly ran towards it, finding a large stone formation with an opening. He sniffed it, scared the rain would muddle the scent, but he couldn't smell anything dangerous.

Crowpaw stepped inside, feeling immense relief from rain no longer pouring down on his pelt. He couldn't see any evidence of other creatures staying here, so he crawled into the back of the cave, shaking water from his pelt.

Thankful that he was finally out of the storm, Crowpaw sat in the far corner of the den and began washing the mud off his legs. Now semi-dry and cold, Crowpaw curled up in the opposite corner, hoping to sleep. He wasn't going to travel at night, nor was he going to travel in the storm any longer. *I'd rather stay here for days than go out in the rain again.* Crowpaw told himself.

He could hear the rain pounding against the roof of his den, some leaking in from the sides but none touching him. The sound of the rain along with the rumbling thunder soon lulled him into a peaceful sleep.

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A sharp sounding bark ripped Crowpaw from his slumber. He said up, the light of dawn peering into the den. Crowpaw's eyes were blurred with sleep but he also saw the silhouette of something else looking into the den.

Crowpaw nearly jumped out his pelt when his eyes focused. He was nose to nose with a dog of some sort. It was brown and fluffy with brown eyes. It was just a kit, young and curious. Crowpaw scrambled to his paws, the dog barking at him. It didn't look hostile, but if it was a kit then it's mother could be around.

Crowpaw slowly tried creeping around the creature, but it kept its eyes firmly focused on him. Crowpaw flattened his ears and hissed, trying to possibly scare it away. His actions just riled the animal up. It jumped and began barking wildly, nipping at Crowpaw. Crowpaw broke away from the animal, jumping out of the entrance to the den and stopping right in front of a much bigger animal.

It was bigger than both foxes and dogs, it faced him with black eyes and snarling teeth. *This must be a coyote!* Crowpaw realized, trying to think quickly. He lashed out with his forepaw, as he did with dog he ran into the forest. He felt his claws hit flesh and the coyote let out a cry of pain. Crowpaw broke into a sprint, running past the den and away from the animals.

He looked over her shoulder, seeing the coyote give chase. It was alarmingly fast. Crowpaw bunched all his energy, forcing himself to go faster. Crowpaw spotted a tall cluster of trees not too far away. *I can climb it!* Crowpaw didn't have much practice climbing but he figured it couldn't be that hard.

Crowpaw reached the tree and gave at tremendous leap, his claws hooking into the bark of a low hanging branch. He used all his strength to pull himself upward and away from the ground. The coyote reached the tree soon after Crowpaw did. It placed its paws on the tree, barking and snapping at Crowpaw.

Crowpaw hissed. "Maybe you should learn how to climb trees, mouse-brain!" He taunted. The coyote barked one last time before dropping off the tree and running back to its den and kit.

Crowpaw's heart was racing from the early morning chase, and he waited for the coyote to vanish from his sight before climbing down the tree. He clumsily made his way down, tripping over his own paws when he landed but quickly recovering. Shaking dust and dried grass from his pelt, Crowpaw looked past the trees.

He didn't realize it while he was running, but Crowpaw had reached the end of the moor. In the distance, past a small field with a twolegplace as Sheba said there would be. It was also small, just as she said. There was just a cluster of twolegnests on either side of a thunderpath, which Crowpaw had no interest or intent to cross.

I wonder what's past that twolegplace. Crowpaw wondered. This was the twolegplace where Sheba came from, and she didn't have any idea of what was past it. Crowpaw was determined to find out, however.

He climbed down a small slope that lead into the small field. The moment he stepped into the field, he caught the nearby scent of rabbit. The scent made his mouth water and he instantly started hunting it down.

He spotted the rabbit a few foxlengths away from him, it was small compared to the rabbits back home, but it would be perfect for just home. Crowpaw broke into a chase after the rabbit, thinking quickly about how he would catch it by himself. *It's just like hunting with a partner.* He told himself.

Crowpaw let the rabbit run ahead before he veered away, cutting the rabbit off and killing it quickly. The taste of its blood made Crowpaw's mouth water. This was the first rabbit he had eaten since leaving MoonClan. Mice were good and all, but they were nothing compared to a rabbit. He ate the rabbit in a few ravenous bites, leaving his energy renewed and his belly full.

Crowpaw buried the remains and looked towards the twolegplace with an inkling of hope in his heart. Whatever was beyond this place, he was determined to discover it.

Chapter 15

Crowpaw approached the twolegplace, the all too familiar scent of twolegs surrounding him. It didn't smell as bad as the first twolegplace he encountered, but it wasn't a place he would like to live. Crowpaw skirted the edges of the twolegplace, hoping he wouldn't have to venture too far into it. He found an entrance, similar to the area where had Crowpaw stayed his first night away from MoonClan.

That place had been relatively safe, so he figured it would be safe here as well. He made sure to keep an eye on any exits or signs of danger. Crowpaw found himself in a large, empty area. There was random twoleg items scattered about and more of the crowfood holders he encountered before. The only thing different about the scents here, was that they were heavy with cat.

Crowpaw wasn't sure why a kittypet would be roaming out here, it was dirty and away from most twoleg nests. Crowpaw's only other assumption was rogues or loners. A loner he was fine with, but Crowpaw didn't really want to interact with a rogue. He had always heard stories that rogues were aggressive whereas loners were more laidback and peaceful.

Crowpaw heard a sharp rustling and spotted the shadow of a cat behind a nearby wall. In a bit of a panic, Crowpaw ducked behind one of the large boxes that reeked of crowfood. He made sure his shadow was hid and hoped that the scent would cover his own.

The cat that stepped out was almost pure white, and would've been it it wasn't for the dirt and muddy water that was speckled across his fur. Crowpaw withheld a gasp when he saw the scars on the tom's body. He had a long scar going down his muzzle to his chin, a deep nick in his left ear and an even large scar going from his shoulder to his foreleg. *That's no kittypet.* Crowpaw thought. *I'd hate to meet whatever animal did that to him. Or him for that matter.* Whoever this cat was, it was clear that he was a fighter.

The tom stopped mid walk, causing Crowpaw's breath to catch in his chest. The tom narrowed his green eyes, sniffing the air. After a moment, he shook his head and went towards the direction that Crowpaw had come from.

Crowpaw waited several heartbeats before stepping out from his hiding spot. He looked around, waiting for the tom to return but saw no sign of it. With a sigh of relief, Crowpaw stepped forward.

Pain shot up Crowpaw's leg as he took a step. He could feel something sharp cutting deep into his paw. Crowpaw let out a hiss of pain and stumbled back, looking at what he had stepped on.

There was pieces of a shiny, dark green stone on the ground. The stones were incredibly sharp and almost transparent. Crowpaw looked at his forepaw, blood was pouring from a deep wound in his paw. The blood dripped onto the ground, Crowpaw clenched his teeth at the pain. *I can't stay here.* Crowpaw told himself, not wanting to attract any predators with the scent of blood.

Crowpaw licked his paw, trying to get the bleeding to stop but to no avail. He would be leaving a trail of blood behind until he found something to fix it. Crowpaw stood up, holding up his injured paw as blood fell to the ground. He forced himself to limp forward, staying wary of the sharp crystals on the ground and trying to care for his paw.

The limping was awkward and his paw burned painfully, he winced and whimpered with each step. The pain was almost unbearable but he had to find something to treat it with. He tried to remember what Skyclaw had said about treating wounds. The only thing Crowpaw could remember was cobwebs and some kind of golden herb.

The pain grew worse with each passing moment, Crowpaw had to stop himself from falling over. He was leaving a very obvious trail of blood and could only hope that no cat was following him. Crowpaw found a crack in the stone path that led to an area under the wall. *Maybe there will be cobwebs in there.* Crowpaw hoped.

He squeezed his way into the hole, nearly yelling in pain when he

touched his injured paw the ground. Crowpaw was overjoyed when he saw a large collection of cobwebs. Using his uninjured paw, he collected a bunch of them and began clumsily applying them to his wounded paw. The blood quickly soaked through the cobwebs, but he kept applying as much as he could.

He kept this up until there was a thick layer of cobweb on his paw and he couldn't see anymore blood. However, his paw still burned and felt hot. Crowpaw was exhausted from the pain, and groaned at the idea of walking anymore.

The hole he was in was cramped and cold, but anything was better than walking another step with his injured paw. Crowpaw curled up in the tight space, his back brushing up against the stone wall uncomfortably. However, the most discomfort came from his paw. It felt hot and throbbed with pain, he could barely focus on anything else.

Sleep did not come easy, and when it did the pain followed him into his sleep. He woke up several times during the night due to the burning cut in his paw. *How can I travel like this?* He questioned, staring out the hole into the night sky. *I can barely walk and I don't know how to treat it, I'm not a medicine cat!*

Crowpaw feared infection, without any herbs he would just have to let his paw remain the way it was. Crowpaw closed his eyes, wincing at the intense pain. *I can do this.* Crowpaw told himself. *I didn't come this far to be stopped by an infection.* Crowpaw's mind was starting to ease. *I can do this...*

Crowpaw continued his journey the next day, his paw wrapped tightly in cobwebs and still incredibly painful. Despite his pain, Crowpaw needed to continue. He wanted out of the twolegplace, it was a hazard for more than just other animals. He kept a close eye on the ground, looking for anymore of the sharp crystals that cut his paw.

Crowpaw found the outskirts of the twolegplace, looking for the exit. Luckily, there were a lot of holes in the wooden wall and Crowpaw found an easy way out. Crowpaw looked around him, the twolegplace now behind him.

For quite a while, all Crowpaw could see was hills and plains with a few scattered twoleg nests about. Crowpaw felt his throat burn, he hadn't had much of anything drink he said farewell to the river that he called home for a moon. The only thing he had drank from was puddles.

Crowpaw walked along the outside of the wooden wall, looking for more water sources but not finding any rivers or ponds. He felt slightly nervous, if he was going to be living with an infection he would need to find water and food. *Prey.* Crowpaw thought with a wince. *How can I hunt with an injured paw?*

Crowpaw knew he could hunt fish with one paw, but he would also need a river. Crowpaw decided to go towards the direction he last saw the river. He limped through the field, avoiding the twolegplace and any strange scents.

Crowpaw quickly found that limping was a much more exhausting way to travel and his uninjured paw quickly grew sore and tired now that it was doing the work of two. Despite this, Crowpaw grit his teeth and continued.

Crowpaw travelled all day, moving much slower than he would've with two perfectly fine paws. He hated the progress, but it had to be made. Crowpaw also had no sign of food or water, and he was starting to crave both. His stomach ached and his throat was dry, he wouldn't stop until he got what he needed.

Things only got worse for Crowpaw when the heat rose, making the desire for water even stronger. *I have to keep going.* Crowpaw told himself, refusing to stop. *Water can't be far, I can feel it.* Crowpaw began to stumbling and he started to pant. His pelt burned and his paw ached more with each step he took.

StarClan please help me. Crowpaw prayed, hoping that StarClan could hear him from this far away. *I need you.* He begged.

As if StarClan heard him, Crowpaw heard the trickling of water. His ears instantly went up and he started tracking the sound, finding a brand new energy that forced him to move quickly.

The trickling was coming from inside the walls of the twolegplace, he placed his eye up to a crack in the wood and noticed a small, strange looking pond with water flowing down a slope of smooth stones. *It's good enough.* Crowpaw thought and found an entrance into the twolegplace.

He looked at the strange pond, it was small and dangerously close to a twolegplace but Crowpaw really couldn't find the energy to care. He bent his head down and began lapping up the water. It was icy cold and instantly soothed his dry mouth and throat. He lapped up water for a long time, until there was water dripping from his chin. The water didn't solve his hunger or the pain in his paw, but now that he had one less thing to worry about they weren't as bad.

Crowpaw slipped out of the twolegplace once more and continued the way he was walking. He knew he wouldn't be able to catch any prey, but he kept his nose up high just in case. *If I come across any prey...I'm certainly going to try and catch it.* Crowpaw kept searching, but struggled to find any scents over the smell of the twolegplace beside him.

The sun was starting to set overhead, and Crowpaw really didn't want to be caught out in the night with an injured paw. He wouldn't be able to outrun anything, he had to find shelter.

As much as he hated to admit, Crowpaw knew that his best chances of his shelter were in the twolegplace. He groaned once before slipping into the twolegplace once more. His guess was correct as Crowpaw quickly found a set of shelters similar to the one he stayed in back near MoonClan territory.

He curled up inside one, his paw throbbing and hunger gnawing at him. *I'll find something to eat tomorrow. For now, I just need sleep.* Sleep resisted, but Crowpaw forced his mind to rest and did his best to ignore the pain that now spread through his entire body.

Chapter 16

Crowpaw barely slept. He tossed and turned in the uncomfortable shelter as the sounds of twolegplace combined with the pain of his paw and the pangs of hunger kept him awake. Crowpaw lifted his head as dawn peered over the horizon. *I have to get up.* Crowpaw told himself, feeling tired and exhausted. *Even if it kills me.* He stood up, yelping as he accidently put pressure on his injured paw.

He hadn't changed the cobwebs since he found them, and the wrappings were dirty. He knew for a fact that if his wound wasn't infected now, it would be soon. Crowpaw swallowed the pain and exited the twolegplace. He was still hunting for a river so he could fish, knowing that he could fish even with his paw being injured. If he found that river then he would have one less problem, but the problem that remained was still a pretty big one.

Crowpaw had no idea what would happen if a wound was left untreated. The bleeding stopped two days ago, but what if got infected and wasn't treated? Would he forever have a limp? Or would it kill him? Crowpaw really didn't want to die because of an infected wound, but part of him feared the absolute worse.

Crowpaw kept walking, he was barely away from the twolegplace and was already feeling hot and exhausted. His mind was foggy and his steps clumsy. Despite everything, Crowpaw kept going. He was going to find that river if it was the last thing he did. *And it just might be.* Crowpaw was a little unnerved by the morbid thought, but he couldn't help but wonder if this wound would be the end of his journey.

Even if the infection didn't kill him, if it got bad enough he might be unable to continue hunting at all. He couldn't run from dogs, coyotes or other cats. He couldn't cross a thunderpath safely and if he never found the river he could very well starve to death. Crowpaw was starting to miss Clan life more than he ever had since leaving.

In MoonClan I have prey and a medicine cat to heal wounds. Grief and homesickness suddenly took over him. *Why did I leave? I'm going to die out here, if it's not from my stupid wound it will be from something else.* Crowpaw stopped walking, closing his eyes and trying to focus. *I'm such an idiot. I can't do this, I don't know why I ever thought I could.*

Crowpaw collapsed in the field, feeling panic and sadness take over him. "I'm just an apprentice." He whimpered. "I can't do this." His voice trembled. "I can't do this..."

The forest was dark, Crowpaw was scared and alone. He looked, not seeing anything nearby. The only thing that caught his attention was a large, shimmering star overhead. *I've seen this star before, but where?* He questioned himself, staring at the star. *It's welcoming.* Crowpaw stepped forward, shocked to find that his paw was fine. *What's going on?* He questioned, but found something pulling him forward.

He wanted to follow the star, he couldn't help but think it was leading him somewhere. Crowpaw quickened his pace, nearly sprinting towards the star, he kept his eyes on it all times. However, he did note certain things around him. There was a fallen tree to his right, and a small boulder to his left.

Over a large hill, Crowpaw spotted the sparkling sight of water. His heart leaped and Crowpaw broke into a spring down the hill. His mouth watered at the idea of fish, he had finally found a river!

Crowpaw shot awake before he reached the river. He was lying in the middle of a field, just after sunhigh. *I fell asleep?* He looked around, he was still in the same spot and the pain of his paw returned as well as the deep pain of hunger. He dropped his head in disappointment, wishing his dream to be real.

Something sparked inside Crowpaw, he stood up and looked up at the sky where he had seen the star in his dream. *Maybe it could be real...* Crowpaw thought and started walking forward. He walked for a while, hunger and his paw slowing him down but there was a determination burning deep inside his chest. He knew where he was going.

Crowpaw's eyes went to a fallen tree not too far, the same fallen tree from his dream. Crowpaw immediately looked the other way, spotting the small boulder as well. *It wasn't just a dream! Someone is leading me to the river!*

He came up to the large hill and forced himself to go as fast as he could with his limp. Crowpaw climbed the hill, nearly exhausted when he reached the top. At the bottom of the hill, just like in his dream, was the river.

Crowpaw wished he could sprint down the river, but he moved as fast as he could. He nearly stumbled a couple of times but safely reached the bottom. His heart raced and his mouth watered. The first thing he did once reaching the river was lap up several mouthfuls of the icy water. *Now it's time to fish.* He quickly hoped that this river had much more fish than the one from the forest.

Crowpaw positioned himself beside the river, finding himself having to lay down instead of sit but got in a good enough form to catch fish. The water was free of his shadow and he had his good paw extended.

It took a while, but Crowpaw soon saw the movement of a fish. His paw moved light lightning, hitting the water and scooping up a fish. It was clumsy, much like the first fish he ever caught but it was still out of water and Crowpaw killed it quickly.

He ate ravenously, finishing the fish off in a few quick bites. His hunger started to ebb but he wanted more. Crowpaw quickly caught two more fish and ate until he was full. His full belly made him feel slightly more comfortable, with the exception of his wounded paw.

He slowly nipped the old cobweb dressing off it. His wound was puffy with pus around the edges. It was definitely infected, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Crowpaw slowly dipped his injured paw into the water. It both stung and felt wonderful. He let the water clean his paw before he pulled it out and gave a few tender licks.

He hoped that washing it would help. He had a source of both food and water, but now he needed shelter. It wasn't night yet, but

Crowpaw wanted to make sure he found before then. He stood up, taking one last drink from the river and started walking back towards the twolegplace. He didn't plan on straying too far from the river, he made sure he remembered where it was.

As Crowpaw limped along, he spotted a large clump of thick bushes. He knew the other Clans made dens from bushes, and he wondered if he could figure it out himself. He approached the bush, giving it a few experimental sniffs. He wasn't sure how he would make this into a den, but he could see the potential.

Crowpaw's ears twitched as he heard a distant noise. He strained his ears, tensing when he heard the furious sound of a dog barking. Crowpaw looked around in alarming, looking for any signs of the dog. He didn't know where it was but it was getting closer.

Suddenly, a figure exploded in a flurry of leaves from the far side of the bushes. Crowpaw fell over in shock as he was suddenly face to face with a strange cat. The cat had wild amber eyes and was panting heavily. "Hide!" The tom shouted and shoved Crowpaw into the bushes, quickly climbing in after him.

"Wha--" The tom slapped his tail over Crowpaw's mouth, silencing him with a sharp hiss. The tom peered out of the bushes, looking for something. The strange cat was a large, dark gray tom. He had a small scar going down the bridge of his nose. Crowpaw heard the dog's barking slowly stop, then heard the sound of shouting twolegs and the pattering of paws as the dog ran away.

"Alright," The tom said, slipping out of the bushes. He pulled a stick out of his fur and looked at Crowpaw. "Sorry about that."

Crowpaw climbed out of the bush as well, wincing as he felt a twig poke his injured paw. "What were you doing?" Crowpaw asked, trying to pull the leaves from his pelt.

The tom shrugged. "Running from dogs. It's fun."

Crowpaw's jaw dropped. "Fun? How is that fun?"

"Because dogs are stupid." The tom laughed. "I am faster than any

dog around here, and braver too. I run away from dogs to make fun of them."

This cat is insane! Crowpaw stared at the cat in shock before shaking his head. "You and I have two very different tastes in fun."

"So I hear a lot." He chuckled, smoothing down the fur on his chest. "I haven't seen you around here before, you a new kittypet? What's your name?"

Crowpaw's tail twitched. "I'm not a kittypet, but I am new around here and my name is Crowpaw."

"Interesting, don't think I've ever seen a crow with paws but cool name, I suppose. My name is Flint."

Crowpaw flicked his ears, of course some random cat wouldn't understand the naming of Clan cats. "It's a long story as to why I'm named Crowpaw." He licked his injured paw, trying to soothe the ache.

Flint looked at him with interest. "Is your paw okay? It looks like you've got quite the wound there."

"Uh, yeah." Crowpaw looked at his wounded paw. "I cut it in the twolegplace, it's getting infected."

Flint stood up and narrowed his amber eyes at Crowpaw's wound. "That looks pretty nasty." *Thanks.* Crowpaw thought bitterly. "But I know a cat who can fix you up."

Crowpaw's attention was instantly pulled. "What? Really?" He questioned. How would a weird cat like Flint know a cat with knowledge of herbs? Unless there were really medicine cats out here.

"Yeah, totally." Flint lifted his head pridefully. "If you want, I can take you to her, I'd hate to leave you here all alone with an infected wound."

"How far is it?" Crowpaw asked anxiously, looking back at the river. He had just found the river, he didn't want to leave it behind.

"Not too far, just across the river and in a small little forest." Flint explained. "I know most cats hate water, but do you think you can cross?" Crowpaw snorted. *If you only knew.*

"Yeah, I can. I've swam before, I like it." Crowpaw explained, standing up beside Flint.

"Impressive." Flint dipped his head and began leading Crowpaw towards the river. Crowpaw looked on the other side, seeing the small forest that Flint was talking about. It wasn't too far, and Crowpaw really hoped that there was a cat who could help him.

"So where are you from?" Flint asked as they crossed the river. "You born 'round here?" He looked at Crowpaw with interest.

Crowpaw shook his head. "No, I travelled here from quite a ways away." He explained, enjoying the cool water. It was painful to swim with his injured paw, but a lot easier than walking he had to admit. "I've been traveling for a little over a moon."

"Wow." Flint mewed, sounding impressed. "How long has your paw been hurt like that?" He shook his pelt free of water when they reached the other side.

"Only about two days." Crowpaw replied, doing the same. "I tried taking care of it myself but I don't know anything about herbs."

"Neither do I," Flint chuckled. "That's why we rely on a cat who does."

"We?" Crowpaw echoed, did Flint have friends?

"Yep, I live with a small group of cats. We're all loners, but we live together in this small little camp. The only requirement is that he provide prey and protection in exchange for prey and protection in return."

Sounds like a Clan. Crowpaw thought, wondering just how big this group of cats was. "Do they care if outsiders come in?"

"As long as you're not a threat." Flint looked at Crowpaw with a playful look in his amber eyes. "Which, no offense, but I don't think

you are. You're just one, young cat with a hurt paw."

Crowpaw couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, I promise that I'm not a threat." He mewed, which lit up Flint's eyes.

"Just as I suspected." Flint nudged Crowpaw playfully. "I'm sure you'll be welcomed by all of them, we've all been in your position." Crowpaw couldn't help but think of Blacksky when talking to this cat. He was playful, brave and kind. He felt both feelings of warmth and sadness at the thought of his father.

Crowpaw and Flint reached the forest and immediately Crowpaw scented other cats, he wondered just how many cats he would meet. The cat scent grew even stronger as he and Flint traveled through the forest.

Crowpaw felt the ground begin to slope away and saw large bushes surrounded a deep hollow. Flint stepped forward, his amber eyes sparkling. "Here we are."

Chapter 17

Crowpaw stared down into the hollow, it had several small dens around the edge as well as pile of prey in the center. *It really is just like a Clan camp!* Crowpaw realizes, finally feeling a sense of familiarity. Beside Crowpaw, Flint stepped into the hollow with confidence. Crowpaw was slightly less confident, unsure of the cats he would meet or what they would think of him. He awkwardly followed Flint down into the hollow.

The first cat Crowpaw spotted what a sleek black she-cat with deep blue eyes. "Where have you been?" The she-cat asked, looking at Flint with a mixture of emotions. One of them was soft, the other was a bit harsher.

"You know," Flint shrugged, facing the she-cat. "The usual."

"Starting fights with dogs?" The she-cat lashed her tail. "You know have two kits right? You can't risk your tail by running away from dogs."

"Both me and my tail are fine." Flint purred. "Plus, no dog can outrun me." He puffed out his chest. It was at this point that the she-cat noticed Crowpaw standing just behind Flint.

"Who's this?" She questioned. "He looks new."

"This," Flint stepped back and nudged Crowpaw forward. "Is Crowpaw. I found him by the river, he's got a hurt paw. I was thinking Ivy could take a look at it."

The she-cat narrowed her eyes at Crowpaw. "You'll have to ask Cooper first, but I'm sure he'll allow it."

"I think so too." Flint held his head high while the she-cat stepped closer to Crowpaw.

"My name is Sabra, by the way." She said kindly. "As long as you're

nice to the cats around here, Cooper should welcome you."

"Cooper?" Crowpaw tried to stop his voice from trembling. Cooper sounded like the leader of this group.

"Cooper is sort of our leader around here." Sabra explained. "We're free to come and go as we please, but while we stay here he kind of makes the rules."

"I see." Crowpaw mewed, Clan cats didn't have the option to come and go but at least this group had a leader.

"Speaking of," Flint stepped in beside Crowpaw. "I'm going to take him to Cooper, he's here right?"

Sabra nodded. "I think most everyone is, they're just in their dens. I'm pretty sure Leo and Rudy are out hunting."

"Wonderful." Flint leaned in, touching his nose to Sabra's. "I'll be back in just a bit, tell the kits I'll be there soon."

"Will do." Sabra purred, looking at Flint with just pure love in his eyes. She nodded towards Flint and padded towards the closest den. Crowpaw could get the faint scent of milk from the den, it reminded him of the nursery back in MoonClan. *They have kits here too, but it looks like everyone has their own separate dens.* Crowpaw noted.

"This way." Flint motioned with his towards a den at the very back of camp that looked larger than the others. Crowpaw walked with Flint, with a slight feeling that eyes were watching him. How many cats lived here? Sabra said that most everyone was in their dens.

They crossed the small camp and reached the den where Flint poked his head in. "You in here, Cooper?" He questioned.

"Yes," A deep voice replied. "What is it, Flint?"

"I found a stray out by the river." Flint explained. *A stray?* "He's got a pretty nasty wound on his paw, I think Ivy could look at it."

"Let me see." Flint looked back at Crowpaw and nodded with his head to step inside. Crowpaw followed despite his slight tremble.

Inside was a large mottled brown tom. The way he held himself reminded Crowpaw of Owlstar. "You're the cat? What's your name?" Crowpaw felt slightly intimidated, but he swallowed his nerves and answered.

"Crowpaw." He replied, keeping his voice steady. He held his paw out for Cooper to see. Cooper looked at his paw, giving it a slight sniff.

"That is pretty bad." Cooper nodded. "I'm sure Ivy will be able to take care of you. Come with me." Cooper brushed past Crowpaw and Flint outside of his den. Crowpaw turned and watched Cooper walk to the den next to his own. "This Ivy's den, Ivy is my daughter and she's been taught about herbs." He explained. "Ivy," He poked his head into the den. "Can you come out here, please?"

After a brief moment a she-cat stepped out into the light. Crowpaw couldn't help but stare when he saw her. She was a beautiful gray tortoiseshell with soft, kind green eyes. On her forehead she had a pure white marking in the shape of a star, it reminded him of the star in his dreams.

Ivy looked at Crowpaw with curious eyes. "Hi there." She greeted with a sweet voice. Crowpaw had to take a moment to shake his head.

"Hi." He replied awkwardly.

Beside Crowpaw, Flint let out a chuckle. "I'll leave you all to your business." He flicked his tail over Crowpaw's ears and went over to his and Sabra's den.

"Ivy this is Crowpaw." Cooper explained. "Flint found him and he has an infected wound on his paw. We were wondering if you could treat it?"

"Let me see it." Ivy stepped forward and Crowpaw held out his paw. The she-cat gave it a sniff and then looked up at Crowpaw. "Yeah, I can treat this. I have the herbs for it."

"Great." Cooper dipped his head. "I'll let you treat him, let me know

how it goes." He looked at Crowpaw for a moment before returning to his own den.

"Come with me." Ivy mewed kindly and turned back into her den while Crowpaw awkwardly followed her. Her den was spacious and smelled strongly of herbs, it brought back memories of the medicine cat den. "Sit down." She instructed kindly and grabbed a mouthful of herbs, including cobweb and the golden herb that Skyclaw used.

Ivy chewed the herb into a poultice and rubbed it on his paw. The juices of the herbs were instantly soothing to Crowpaw. "So, where are you from? Are you a kittypet? Rogue? Loner?" She looked up with curiosity as she wrapped his paw with cobwebs.

Crowpaw thought for a moment, he supposed that he was a loner. Since he had been living away from the Clans for over a moon. "I'm a loner, but I'm not from around here. I came from quite a long ways away.

"Oooh." Ivy purred. "Sounds interesting." She started cleaning up her herbs. "So what's your story?"

"My story?" Crowpaw asked, tilting his head.

"Every cat has a story. Why are you travelling?" Ivy turned back to look at him. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, I'm just interested." She licked her chest out of embarrassment. "Sorry if I'm being nosy."

"You're not." Crowpaw assured her, he never considered that every cat had a story. His own wasn't exactly a happy one.

"Good to know." Ivy's eyes glowed for a moment, then she looked at his paw. "I should be able to treat the infection, but it might take a while for your paw to fully heal. I'm sure my father would let you stay here, but when you're better you would have to provide."

"Provide?" Crowpaw questioned, looking at his paw.

Ivy nodded. "Every cat around here is required to provide through hunting. You won't be able to hunt on that paw, but when it's healed you would just have to hunt for us for a while and then you

would be free to go, well you're always free to go but you'd be expected to hunt."

"I see." Crowpaw thought for a moment, wondering if staying here was a good idea. He would have his paw treated and he would have plenty of prey. Maybe it would be good for him to live with a group again, plus he could leave whenever he wanted. Not to mention, part of him really wanted to get to know Ivy. He wasn't sure what is was about her, but she had already caught his interest. "I guess I'll stay if you'll let me."

Ivy's lit up. "That's wonderful. Let's go tell my father." She stood up and helped Crowpaw to his own paws. They stepped out of Ivy's den and Crowpaw noticed that two more cats had stepped inside the camp. One was a huge golden tom with fur that puffed up around his neck like a lion. The other was a smaller, yet still pretty large brown tabby she-cat.

Crowpaw turned his attention back to Ivy who was approaching her father's den. "Father," She called before stepping inside, Crowpaw stepped inside after her. "I can treat Crowpaw's wound, but he won't be able to care for himself for a while. Could he stay here with us, at least until he's better? I already explained to him that after his paw is healed he will have to hunt as well."

Cooper looked at Crowpaw with interest in his amber eyes. "You understand that you'll have to hunt when you're healed?"

Crowpaw nodded. "Yes I do."

Cooper dipped his head. "Then you can stay here." He stood up. "I should tell the rest, and we can find you a den to stay in." Crowpaw followed Ivy and Cooper outside of the den where more cats had stepped outside. They all looked to Cooper as he stepped into view. Crowpaw also felt several gazes burning into his. "Everyone," Cooper called out, his voice echoing similar to how Owlstar's would during a Clan meeting. "This is Crowpaw, a cat that Flint found and brought back so he could have an infected wound treated by Ivy. He will be staying with us at least until his paw is healed and he has hunted for us." The brown tabby she-cat from earlier muttered something to the large golden tom as they looked at Crowpaw. "I

trust you will all make Crowpaw feel welcome."

With that, Cooper turned back to his den and Crowpaw heard the squeaks of kits. He turned his head where he saw sleek, thin she-cat with tan fur and darker markings step out of a den with two kits running out from behind her. Both were tabbies, but the she-cat had green eyes and was golden brown. The other had amber eyes and was a darker brown. They stopped and looked at Crowpaw with interest.

"You're new." The she-cat pointed out, looking at the tom for a moment then back to Crowpaw. "Who are you?"

"I'm Crowpaw." He said awkwardly.

"That's a really weird name." The tom snorted.

The tan she-cat nudged the kits. "Finch, Buttercup, don't be rude." She scolded lightly. "Go to your parents, they're back from hunting." The kits let out squeals of excitement and bounded off towards the golden tom and the brown tabby she-cat. The tan she-cat faced Crowpaw, he was slightly taken aback but her bright blue eyes. "Sorry about them." She purred. "Kits will be kits."

"It's quite alright." Crowpaw mewed. "I've been around kits before, and they're right; my name is weird." He heard a slight giggle from Ivy beside him.

The she-cat's eyes were soft. "My name is Raindrop. Welcome to our little camp, Crowpaw. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you." Crowpaw felt touched by the she-cats kind voice. He felt Ivy nudging him forward.

"Come on," She said playfully. "You should meet the other cats. There's not many more, but still." She urged forward and he followed. They approached the two cats that he didn't know, the parents of Finch and Buttercup.

"You must be Crowpaw." The large golden tom greeted. "My name is Leo and this is my mate Rudy."

"It's nice to meet you." Rudy said kindly, looking down at Finch and Buttercup while they wrestled at their father's paws.

"You as well." Crowpaw dipped his head, feeling grateful that all the cats he had met were so nice.

He heard squeaking and looked over towards Sabra's den where he saw two more kits come tumbling out. One of them was black and white and the other was a black tabby, both she-cats. Flint quickly followed them, his amber eyes resting on Crowpaw.

"Crowpaw!" He exclaimed. "How's your paw?" He questioned, looking at Ivy. "She didn't hurt you more did she?" Ivy snorted but Crowpaw could see the playful look in her eyes.

"No." Crowpaw chuckled. "And it's feeling better, thanks to her."

"That's great news. I also heard that you're staying here." Flint's eyes sparkled. "That's pretty cool too. Also," He turned to look at what Crowpaw assumed were his kits. "This is Firefly and this is Starling. My two daughters." He held his head proudly. Firefly was the black and white she-cat and Starling was the tabby.

"It's nice to meet you, Crowpaw!" Starling exclaimed and her sister nodded along.

"That's everyone." Ivy said, her voice light. "There's not many of us, but we all work together, I'm sure you'll be pretty close with everyone here shortly."

"Everyone's been really nice so far." Crowpaw looked at Ivy, her eyes soft. "Thanks for welcoming me."

"Of course." Ivy purred. "Now let's get you a den, you need to rest that paw." Crowpaw agreed and followed Ivy as she led him to an empty den near her own. He couldn't help but feel a glimmer of joy and hope, what was his future with this group of cats? Maybe he had finally found his new home.

Chapter 18

Crowpaw stretched out, blinking sleep from his eyes. He sat up in his nest, smoothing down his sleep ruffled fur. The early morning sun was shining into his den, followed by a cool, leaf-fall breeze. He shivered slightly, slipping farther back into his den to avoid the cold. Crowpaw lifted his injured paw, which wasn't so much of an injury anymore. All that was left of the painful wound was now a long scar going down his paw pads, but it didn't hurt and he could walk.

It had been nearly two moons since Crowpaw started staying with the group of loners in the forest and for the first time since he left MoonClan, he felt at home. All the cats had been welcoming, he found close friends in Flint, Rudy and especially Ivy. He spent most of the day with Ivy while she was treating his paw and he enjoyed every moment with the pretty she-cat.

Being around Ivy made Crowpaw's heart flutter, he felt both shy and incredibly comfortable around her. He wondered if she felt the same way about him, there was a large part of him that really wanted her to.

Crowpaw's ears perked up as he heard Ivy's soft voice. She was talking to Cooper, he strained his ears to listen.

"How is his injury doing?" Cooper questioned. Crowpaw tensed, they were talking about him. He had gone a long time without hunting, was Cooper upset with him?

"It's much better." Ivy explained, her voice light and cheerful. "I was planning on talking to him about hunting today. I'm sure he'll be more than ready."

"I hope so." Cooper's voice didn't sound angry, but with that cat it was hard to tell. "I know most cats like having him around, but he needs to help out."

"I know, father." Ivy purred. "And he knows too, I'll talk to him today."

"Good." There was a moment of silence between the two. "I'm going hunting, I expect him to be on his paws and hunting by tomorrow."

"Understood." Crowpaw heard Cooper's paws shuffle paw and Ivy's grow closer. Crowpaw frantically smoothed down his fur, getting ready to face Ivy.

The tortoiseshell poked her head inside, green eyes sparkling. "Good morning." She purred.

"Good morning." Crowpaw dipped his head, trying to hide how flustered he was. "Sleep well?"

"Always do." She stepped inside, looking around for a moment then turning her gaze back to him. "How's your paw?"

Crowpaw lifted his paw. "Much better. Thanks to you." He felt like an idiot with every word that fell out of his mouth.

"I'm glad I could help." Ivy stepped closer, giving his paw a sniff. "You can't even tell it was injured." Crowpaw set his paw down, letting out a happy purr. "So," Ivy shuffled her paws awkwardly. "Would you be up to hunting today?"

Crowpaw hadn't hunted in over two moons, he wondered if he was still able to. He didn't want to be thrown out of this group though, so he had to try. "I think so. I have to try at least." He stood up, looking at Ivy who had an excited expression.

"That's wonderful!" She twitched her paws excitedly. "Why don't I show you the best places to hunt? I-If you want me to go of course." She dropped her head, looking embarrassed.

Crowpaw's heart jumped at the thought of hunting with Ivy. "Sounds like fun." He mewed, Ivy's spirits looked instantly lifted.

"Then let's go!" The she-cat nearly jumped out of the den, Crowpaw couldn't help but feel the same way. He followed Ivy out into the camp and took a look around. He could see Raindrop playing with

Buttercup, Finch, Firefly and Starling. From living here, he knew that while Leo, Rudy, Flint and Sabra were out hunting, Raindrop would watch the kits.

Crowpaw wondered if she had any kits of her own, she reminded him of a queen and the way she looked at kits he knew that Raindrop loved spending time around them. He hadn't seen Raindrop hunting much, but he assumed that Raindrop's duty was caring for kits.

"Are you ready?" Ivy pulled Crowpaw's attention away from Raindrop and he looked back to her. He nodded and followed her out of the camp. "Have you hunted before?" Ivy questioned as they walked through the forest.

"I have." Crowpaw replied. "I've been hunting my whole life, except for these last two moons." He chuckled awkwardly.

Ivy purred. "Well, what can you catch? Mice?" She looked at him expectantly.

"I can catch mice. I sort of taught myself that." Crowpaw thought back to his time living in the forest. "But where I come from we mostly catch rabbits and fish."

"Fish?" Ivy echoed in confusion. "You actually *like* fish?"

Crowpaw laughed, he expected this response. "I do, it's really good. I also know how to swim." He held his head high, hoping that Ivy didn't think he was too arrogant for saying that.

"I couldn't imagine that." Ivy shuddered. "Why would you want to swim? Do you live in a river?"

Crowpaw laughed. "No, but we're surrounded by them." His mind floated back to his first swimming lesson. "It's not as hard as you think, and it's really refreshing in greenleaf."

Ivy thought for a moment. "Well, it's too cold to swim now." She looked around at the leaves that started to turn shades of gold and brown. "But maybe in newleaf you could teach me how to swim." *Will I stay that long?* Crowpaw asked himself. He hadn't expected to

stay two moons, would he really stay until next newleaf? Ivy's ears dropped and she looked at her paws. "I-if you stay that long, that is." Crowpaw felt a twinge of guilt, his expression must of shifted and she thought she upset him. "I don't want you to feel like you *have* to stay, but you really don't have to."

"I haven't decided yet." Crowpaw admitted. "I had no idea where I was going when I left and I still don't. I don't know where I would go if I *did* leave." He looked at the forest floor. "I guess I just have to wait and see what feels right."

"You don't have to rush yourself to a decision." Ivy's voice was like heather on his ears. "Take your time and we'll support whatever decision you make." She looked up, her tone lightening. "And if you do decide to leave, you'll always have a den here."

Warmth flooded through Crowpaw's body. "Thank you, Ivy. That means a lot." He shared a caring expression with Ivy before she broke away from it, looking slightly flustered.

"We should get hunting, the prey won't just jump into our claws." She chuckled and sniffed the air. Crowpaw did what she did, catching a faint scent of mouse on the breeze. Ivy turned to her left and began tracking. Crowpaw followed silently behind her, keeping his eyes peeled.

A few foxlengths away, Crowpaw spotted a fat mouse nibbling on some beech seeds. Ivy saw it too, as she dropped into a hunting crouch. Her crouch was much different from his own, it was neat and steady. She was low to the ground and moved with silence. Crowpaw watched her every move, her muscles rippling underneath her tortoiseshell pelt.

She moved with the speed of a MoonClan cat, moving from her position to the mouse in the blink of an eye. Crowpaw was incredibly impressed, for a loner she had great talent for hunting. Ivy turned to face him, the mouse in her jaws and green eyes sparkling. After a moment she set it down, licking her chest in embarrassment. "Sorry, I suppose I should've let you catch it. I just got excited."

"It's alright." Crowpaw assured her. "I can find my own prey." He sniffed the air once more, starting to track down his own prey. He soon caught the scent of another mouse and followed it to a small clearing. Crowpaw dropped into a hunting crouch, feeling a slight amount of pressure. He wanted to impress Ivy, he wanted to show her what a Clan cat could do.

Crowpaw crept forward, feeling Ivy's eyes on him. He watched the mouse, refusing to lose his focus. Crowpaw stepped forward silently, keeping his balance steady. He took a deep breath and dashed forward. He felt his claws hit the mouse and he killed it with a swift bite. The excitement of hunting buzzed through his body. His paw felt as if it had never even been injured.

He turned to face Ivy who looked impressed. "Not bad." She mewed. "You're quite the hunter." Crowpaw's heart skipped at her compliments. "But there's a lot of prey to catch, let's keep going."

Ivy and Crowpaw hunted together for quite some time, Crowpaw managed to catch three more mice and Ivy caught another mouse and a squirrel. Crowpaw still struggled to catch squirrels and the one she got was one he nearly let get away, he felt embarrassed but Ivy didn't seem to mind or judge him.

It was a little bit past sunhigh when Crowpaw and Ivy decided to return to the camp. They carried their prey and Crowpaw felt genuinely happy for once. Hunting with Ivy was the most fun he had in a long time, he didn't want it to end. *It doesn't have to.* Crowpaw told himself. *I could always stay here.*

Crowpaw and Ivy stepped into camp, he spotted Flint and Sabra talking with Raindrop while the kits played. Cooper watched from his den, his amber eyes going to Crowpaw and Ivy. He felt slightly intimidated by Cooper's gaze, but he followed Ivy to the fresh-kill pile and they set down their catch.

"Not bad, Crowpaw." Crowpaw jumped slightly at Flint's voice. He looked at the gray tom who was gazing approvingly at his and Ivy's haul of prey. "You're fitting right in, aren't you?"

Crowpaw felt awkward, he could feel Raindrop and Sabra looking

at him as well. "I suppose." He mewed, his voice cracking slightly.

"Don't be nervous." Sabra purred. "We've all enjoyed having you around, and we've had no doubt that you'd be a fantastic hunter."

Crowpaw continuously found it odd to find encouragement and faith from so many cats who barely knew him. He couldn't find that kind of encouragement from his own mother, what was it about these cats?

Crowpaw looked back at Cooper, the large tom had a look of approval on his face that made Crowpaw feel more comfortable. Beside him, Ivy was talking to Sabra, Flint and Raindrop about the hunt while the kits played. He almost felt like he was back in MoonClan, everything was the same and yet it was so different. *Maybe this is my new home. Maybe this change will be good.*

Chapter 19

Crowpaw jumped forward, his claws catching the mouse with ease. He killed it with a swift bite and turned around to face his hunting partner, Leo. The large golden tom nodded, his amber eyes glowing. "Not bad." He purred. "You've really proven yourself around here."

"Thanks." Crowpaw held his high, feeling pride wash over him. He had been hunting with the group for several days now and had easily slipped back into the way of hunting. He learned that cats hunted in pairs around here, he didn't know why but he did know that he enjoyed hunting with friends. Normally he hunted with Ivy or Flint, but today Leo asked him to go hunting.

Crowpaw didn't know much about Leo, but he knew he was an incredibly nice cat. He played with his kits constantly and was a great hunter. Crowpaw had enjoyed his day hunting with Leo and each of them had caught several pieces of prey so far. It was early into leaf-fall, and leaf-bare would be here soon so the more prey they caught the better.

Crowpaw hadn't expected to find this group, but he was glad he did. He would have a warm den to stay during the cold season and they had a cat killed with herbs. "Let's keep hunting." Leo said. "We should each try to catch at least one more piece of prey." Crowpaw agreed and the two of them went in separate directions to cover more ground.

Crowpaw padded towards the river, knowing of a spot where mice would go frequently, he almost always had luck there. Crowpaw padded towards the section with a slight skip in his step. He was genuinely happy living here, and he hoped to stay for at least a little while longer.

It wasn't long before Crowpaw caught the scent of mouse, but he also caught another scent. It smelled of cat, but it wasn't familiar to him. Crowpaw looked around, he couldn't find the cat or any evidence that they had been here. He supposed that there would be

other cats around here, Cooper and his cats didn't necessarily own the forest, they just lived there.

Crowpaw shrugged and continued his hunt. The smell of mice grew stronger and the smell of cat faded. Soon, Crowpaw only focused on his hunt, forgetting about the cat scent completely. Near a large bush was a mouse, sniffing around for its own food. Crowpaw dropped into a crouch and crept forward.

He was getting ready to pounce when he heard a noise from a few taillengths away, it sounded like a snapping twig. Crowpaw's ears twitched and the mouse began to run. *No!* Crowpaw hissed and ran after it, hoping to still catch it. He kept his eyes on the mouse and managed to catch it before it vanished into the forest. Crowpaw looked around, knowing that he didn't make the sound himself. *If Leo nearly scared away my prey I'm going to be very upset.* Crowpaw snorted.

A second later, Crowpaw felt a heavy weight hit him and he rolled across the forest floor. Sharp claws dug into his pelt and ripped at his skin. Crowpaw hissed in pain and shock, his face muffled by gray tabby fur. Crowpaw unsheathed his claws and lashed out at his attacker. The cat on top of him attacked harder, digging his claws even deeper into Crowpaw's body.

Crowpaw struggled from the pain, he sank his teeth into the cat's foreleg and bit down as hard as he possibly could. The cats blood was sour on his tongue and he let out a harsh hiss in Crowpaw's ear. Crowpaw bit down harder, refusing to let go.

Pain ripped down Crowpaw's side and he felt teeth in his scruff. The attacking cat tore him off his leg and threw Crowpaw across the forest floor. He felt rocks digging into his already burning pelt. Crowpaw quickly scrambled to his paws, facing his attacker. It was a cat he had never seen before, a gray tabby with a malicious tabby eyes. He had a long scar along his jaw and another across one of his forepaws.

"I've never seen you around here before." The rogue snarled with a slight chuckle in his voice. Blood spilled from the bite wound on his leg. "Didn't expect you to fight so hard."

Crowpaw hissed. "Why did you attack me in the first place?" He demanded, lashing his tail.

"Because you stole my prey." The rogue hissed back, stepping threateningly close to Crowpaw.

"It was my prey." Crowpaw snapped. "And you nearly scared it away. Maybe you should learn how to hunt before you accuse cats of stealing prey."

The cat lashed forward, Crowpaw didn't have a chance to react before he felt a claw cut into his ear. Crowpaw hissed and stumbled backwards, his ear stinging. "Arrogant kit." The rogue spat. "I know how to hunt. I scared it away on purpose, idiot."
Crowpaw growled, his claws scraping into the earth below. *I'm not a kit and I'm not an idiot.*

"You don't know the first thing about this forest. I own it and all the prey inside of it. You should learn about the cats who live here before you go hunting without care." The rogue growled.

"I've been living here for two moons and have not once seen you around here, and if you think you own this forest then I'm not the idiot of the two of us." Crowpaw mewed, feeling incredibly annoyed at this tom's cocky attitude. *He reminds me of Elmpaw.* Crowpaw's heart twisted in anger as he thought about his father's killer.

The rogue attacked once more without notice, knocking Crowpaw to the ground and tearing into his fur. Crowpaw hissed and clawed him back. "You need to learn some manners!" The rogue hissed and bit down on his shoulder. The rogue was much bigger than Crowpaw and Crowpaw hadn't had much practice fighting since Blacksky's death.

Despite this, Crowpaw fought back as hard as he could. Pain blurred his vision as the cat ripped into him, he could feel several bleeding wounds and was starting to become fearful for his life.

"Let him go!" There was a large booming voice and the sound of cats rushed in around Crowpaw and the rogue. The rogue was torn off and Crowpaw managed to sit up. He found himself face to face

with the concerned eyes of Rudy.

"Are you okay?" She questioned, her voice sounding terrified. The tabby looked over Crowpaw and helped him to his paws.

"I think so." Crowpaw looked over his body, he had long scratches down his side and a bloody wound on his shoulder but they didn't appear to be dangerously deep. He looked over at the rogue was now facing Leo, Cooper, Flint and Sabra.

The rogue stood up, backing up against a tree and flattening his ears. "You lot are the most annoying cats I've ever met!" He shouted with a hiss. "Why are defending a cat you don't even know?"

"We do know him." Cooper growled. "He's been living with us for the past two moons." He explained.

"The real question is," Sabra mewed, her voice sharp as a claw. "Why are you *attacking* a cat you don't even know?"

"Because he stole my prey." The rogue lashed his tail. Compared to Cooper and Leo, he looked incredibly small.

"Out here, if you catch prey it belongs to you." Flint growled. "You don't own this forest and neither do we. We've lived here together here for a long time and yet you still pick on new cats like you own the place."

"I lived here before the lot of you did!" The rogue argued.

"You were a kit when I first came here, Ripper." Cooper snapped. "You're no older than my own daughter, and not much older than him." He motioned towards Crowpaw. "I wouldn't care if I had never met this cat, I still wouldn't let a fox-heart like you attack him."

Crowpaw flattened his ears, shocked that these cats were so quick to protect him. He looked over at Rudy who was now facing the rest of the cats, she looked as annoyed as the rest of them.

"You all might as well be kittypets!" Ripper spat. "You'll soon learn that it's every cat for themselves out here, you can live in your

groups but would you really risk your life for one of these strangers?"

"They're not strangers to me." Cooper said, his voice bold. "I would fight to the death for each and every one of them."

"Then you're an idiot, Cooper." Ripper lashed his tail and broke through the three cats, running out of the forest. Cooper lowered his head and let out a sigh.

"That cat has some serious issues." Flint shook his head. "I was hoping he was gone for good." Flint and Sabra looked over their shoulder at Crowpaw. "You alright?"

Crowpaw nodded despite his burning his wounds. Every day he was shocked at how much like a Clan these cats were. Cooper turned away as well and approached Crowpaw. "Let's get your wounds treated." He began leading the group back to their camp.

"How did you know I was out here?" Crowpaw questioned.

"They found me and told me that they scented Ripper in the area, which was the area that you were hunting it. I was hoping to find you before he did but I guess we didn't." Leo explained.

"Ripper's always been causing problems for us. He lives in the twolegplace with a group of flea-bitten rogues who are just like him." Sabra growled. "They do nothing but terrorize kittypets."

"They're not a kind group of cats." Flint added. "But normally they stay in their twolegplace, Ripper is really the only one who roams out here to us."

"And only to ever cause problems." Rudy twitched her ears.

"I apologize that you had to deal with him, Crowpaw." Cooper looked over his shoulder at Crowpaw.

"It's alright." Crowpaw mewed. "It wasn't my first time fighting." He assured the cats around him.

"I saw that nasty bite you left on his front leg." Flint nudged him

playfully. "He'll definitely feel that tomorrow."

"He's probably feeling it now." Sabra purred with amusement. "I'd be pretty scared to fight a cat like you after seeing that wound." Crowpaw felt both warmed and somewhat embarrassed by their praises, but they made him feel better about the whole situation.

They soon reached camp where Leo, Rudy, Sheba and Flint went back to their kits and Crowpaw made his way to Ivy's den. The gray tortoiseshell stepped out and looked at Crowpaw in alarm.

"What happened to you?" She demanded, looking at his wounds with concern deep in her green eyes.

"He ran into Ripper." Cooper explained from behind Crowpaw. "We chased him off but he needs your help."

"Of course." Ivy nudged Crowpaw into the den and making him sit down. "It feels like I just got you out of here." She chuckled and began sorting through herbs.

"Hopefully I can keep hunting after these wounds though." Crowpaw added with a chuckle.

"Hopefully." Ivy purred and began applying herbs to his wounds. "You've certainly kept me busy since you got here, I'll tell you that much."

Crowpaw's pelt burned, he hoped she didn't mean that in a bad way. Crowpaw kept his mouth shut and just let her work on his wounds. He remained quiet until a question burned at the back of his mind. "Why does Ripper cause so much trouble with you all?"

Ivy shrugged. "I don't know. He just always has. He believes that he should have free roam to the forest and we don't own the forest we just hate it when he tries to attack us. That scar on Flint's muzzle is from Ripper."

Crowpaw looked at his paws. "I was honestly a little surprised when Cooper and the others showed up to save me."

Ivy looked up curiously. "Why's that?"

"I don't know." Crowpaw looked at her. "I haven't been a part of your group for very long and I haven't even decided if I'm going to stay."

Ivy's eyes softened, sending butterflies into Crowpaw's stomach. "Crowpaw, you live with us and you hunt for us. That automatically grants you protection from each and everyone of us. If you saw Sabra in trouble would rush to her aide?"

"Absolutely." Crowpaw answered without hesitating.

"Then you understand." Ivy began cleaning up her herbs. "We look out for each other, I don't know how you lived before but that's how it works here."

Crowpaw dropped his head. "That's how it did work. Back where I lived we took an oath, to protect our Clans even at the cost of our lives."

"Clan?" Ivy echoed, then shook her head. "You don't have to explain that now, but you do understand." Crowpaw nodded. "It doesn't matter who you are, we will protect you." There was a certain tenderness in Ivy's eyes. "You're good to go." She said after a moment. "You can hunt just take it easy, come to me for new dressings."

"Thank you, Ivy." Crowpaw dipped his head towards the pretty she-cat before turning out of her den, a feeling of determination sweeping over him. His conversation with Ivy had helped him to make up his mind. Crowpaw walked confidently over to Cooper's den and stood in the entrance.

"Cooper? Can I talk to you?" He questioned, trying to keep his voice steady. Cooper stepped into the light, his amber eyes sparkling with interest.

"What is it, Crowpaw? Is everything alright with your wounds?" He looked over Crowpaw's injures, now covered with herbs.

"Yes, they're fine." Crowpaw took a deep breath. "I wanted to thank you for coming to help me after Ripper attacked me. I didn't know

that you would defend a cat like me. You don't know me very well and I don't even technically live with you."

Cooper blinked. "Crowpaw, it doesn't matter that you don't live with us. You are staying with us and you hunt with us, you are under our protection. I meant when I said that I would fight to the death for each of the cats here, that means you as well."

Crowpaw nodded slowly. "I know, and that's why I've made a decision. If you'll have me, I want to live here. Permanently."

Cooper's eyes seemed to turn to honey, they filled with happiness. "I was hoping you would say that, Crowpaw. Every cat around here likes you and I'm sure they will accept you." Crowpaw felt his heart get lighter. "However, we have a rule here. Whenever there's a decision that needs to be made, the cats of the group make a vote. Though I doubt any cat will turn you down." Cooper stood up and walked past Crowpaw. "Follow me."

Cooper led Crowpaw to the center of the camp, getting the attention of the cats around them. "Please everyone, gather around the center of camp. I have an announcement." The cats perked up their ears and gathered around, their eyes going to Crowpaw. Behind them, Crowpaw could hear Ivy joining the group as well. "As you all know," Cooper began once the small group had gathered. "Crowpaw has been staying with us for over two moons. After Ivy took care of an injury he has now begun hunting for us." The cats nodded "Just now, Crowpaw asked me if he could stay with us. As usual, when a cat joins us we leave it to a vote. Would all the cats in favor of having Crowpaw stay with us please stand up."

Crowpaw watched with wide eyes as each of the members stood up, including Cooper and the kits. Crowpaw looked over his shoulder at Ivy who was standing as well, her eyes as soft as heather. Warmth spread throughout Crowpaw's body as he looked at the cats who were welcoming him into their home.

"Just as I thought." Cooper purred. "We have all decided and I am proud to welcome our newest member, Crowpaw!" The cats cheered and for a moment Crowpaw felt as if he was back in MoonClan.

No. Crowpaw told himself. *Not MoonClan. I'm in my new home.*

Chapter 20

Crowpaw breathed in the chilly, leaf-fall air. He suppressed a shiver and looked around him. The cats of his group were just starting to become active. Flint was watching Starling and Firefly by with a large, golden-brown leaf that had fallen from the trees above. They squealed and laughed as they attacked their makeshift prey. Both would be good hunters, but Starling appeared to be quite bigger than Firefly, but Firefly was smaller and quicker. *Both would make wonderful Clan cats.* Crowpaw thought, watching them with interest. *They have to be about six moons old. I wonder when cats starting to train to hunt around here?* Crowpaw's mind wandered back to MoonClan, Featherdawn's kits would probably be apprentices by now. Who were their mentors? Did they know night hunting yet?

Crowpaw shook his head, he couldn't be blinded by his former Clan life. He had a new home, a home full of cats who loved him. He was no longer in the forest that constantly reminded him of his father's death and away from his mother who treated him less than crowfood. Crowpaw let out a small sigh, his breath billowing before him in the chilly air. It was starting to get cold, it was early morning but leaf-bare wasn't too far off. He hoped that this group would have enough prey. It was much smaller than a Clan, so there wasn't as many mouths to feed.

Sickness could still take hold. Crowpaw suppressed a shiver, all the prey in the world couldn't cure greencough but at least it would keep the cats strong. His claws dug into the semi-frozen earth beneath his paws. *I'll do everything in my power to make sure that this group has all the prey they need.* He felt a certain responsibility towards this group, they had welcomed him so well and treated him with genuine kindness. He hadn't been with this group officially for even a half-moon yet and he already felt like he was at home.

"Good morning." A sweet voice sounded behind Crowpaw, he turned his head to see Ivy stepping out of her den. Her green eyes were bright and soft as usual, but there was something slightly

different about them. Regardless, they still made Crowpaw's heart flip in his chest.

"Good morning." He dipped his head in return. The wounds that Ripper had left were healing well, the only scar he would have would be a nick in his lower left ear, but it wasn't something that bothered him.

"How are your wounds feeling?" Ivy stepped forward, giving his pelt a gentle sniff. "Any pain?"

Crowpaw shook his head. "No, the herbs are working quite well. Thank you." He purred, hoping Ivy knew how grateful he was for her care.

"It's my pleasure." Ivy's voice was like honey, soothing Crowpaw's nerves and making him feel almost weak. "Say," She looked around. "If you're not going anywhere, we should go for a walk."

"A walk?" Crowpaw tilted his head, somewhat confused by her offer.

"Yes, a walk." Ivy nudged him to his paws, Crowpaw felt his pelt burning as she did so. "We can catch some prey along the way." Crowpaw hesitated, but eventually gave in. He had no idea why he was so unsure now, he had hunted with Ivy before, why did this feel different?

Ivy and Crowpaw walked outside of camp together, past Cooper's den and away from the river. They walked through the forest which was affected by an early morning frost. It would be gone once the sun came up, but it still made the air cold and caused the two cats to shiver.

Ivy stepped closer to Crowpaw, her pelt brushing his and sending sparks throughout his entire body. He nearly jumped away in shock, but remained where he was. His pelt burned, but the warmth that came from her body was soothing and seemed to melt the frost underneath his paws. "I hope you don't mind me being a little closer." Ivy said quietly, a hint of embarrassment lining her voice. "It's just cold."

"I don't mind." Crowpaw was shocked at how smooth his voice was, his heart was racing but his talking was steady. He really didn't mind, in fact he wouldn't care if they stayed like this forever. Ivy's warmth and sweet scent surrounded him, it might as well had been greenleaf for him.

"So," Ivy looked at him, curiosity bubbling in her green gaze. "Now that you live here permanently, would you mind telling me your story?"

"My story?" Crowpaw echoed, confused.

"The first day we met, I asked you what your story was. You didn't answer me and I told you that you didn't have to, but a while back you recently mentioned something about a Clan." Ivy's eyes burned with a deep curiosity. Crowpaw supposed it might be time to tell her where he really came from, but would she think less of him when she knew that he ran away from home?

"I suppose." Crowpaw replied awkwardly, looking ahead through the trees. Where did he begin?

Ivy stopped, looking at him patiently. "Why don't we sit down?" Crowpaw agreed and the two sat side by side and just as close. "Begin whenever you're ready."

Crowpaw took a deep breath, thinking about his old life. "Well," He began. "I was born in MoonClan. A Clan is a group of cats who live together, we hunt together, fight together and provide for each other. It's similar to what you have here but there's a bit more to it." Ivy watched intently, her gaze focused on him. "We have warriors, which are the cats who mostly hunt and fight for the Clan. Before a cat can be a warrior they have go through apprentice training, that's what I am--" He cut himself off. "That's what I was. I was an apprentice. They're kits who are six moons old and are trained by a mentor how to be a proper hunter."

"That's interesting." Ivy's voice was genuine. "So you were an apprentice? Who was your mentor?"

Crowpaw's heart twisted as he thought of Silverpool. "Her name was

Silverpool and she was a wonderful cat, she taught me everything so well. Her training is what allowed me to survive so long on my own."

"Wow." Ivy's eyes widened slightly. "So, what happens when an apprentice is done with their training? They just become a warrior?"

"Kind of," Crowpaw looked forward. "When a mentor believes that an apprentice has enough training then the leader of our Clan holds a ceremony where the apprentice receives their warrior name."

"Warrior name?" Ivy tilted her head, now looking confused.

"Our names change throughout our lives, for example; when I was born I was Crowkit. As an apprentice I was Crowpaw and if I were to have become a warrior it would be chosen by my leader. Like my mentor SIlverpool or my father Blacksky. And leaders always have star at the end of their name, my leader was Owlstar."

"That's so weird." Ivy said, but didn't seem to be intending an insult. "I couldn't imagine my name constantly changing."

Crowpaw shrugged. "It's not constant, and receiving your warrior name is a big deal. It's often the best day of an apprentice's life." *I'll never receive my warrior name. I'll remain Crowpaw for the rest of my days.* Part of him felt incredibly sad, he remembered being so excited to become a warrior when he was a kit.

"Interesting. So why do leader's get special names too? Is it just because they become leader? How is a leader decided?" Crowpaw could see the questions burning in the back of Ivy's mind.

He felt uneasy for a moment, how could he explain StarClan to her? Would she even believe him? He had to try. "Well, a leader is more than just a cat who leads the Clan. Leaders chose deputies, and when the leader dies then the current deputy steps up as leader. Then leaders go to receive their nine lives."

"Nine lives?" He could tell that Ivy was holding back a chuckle. "Cats having nine lives is just an elder's tale, right?"

Crowpaw shook his head, looking down at his paws. "For us, it's not. We believe that when cats die they go to join StarClan. He looked up at the sky, he couldn't see the stars but he knew that they were their. "StarClan cats watch over us, our ancestors and lost loved ones. They guide us and when a leader goes to become leader they are given nine lives by nine cats that they have lost over time. This allows the leader to lead their Clan for a long time and for them to sacrifice themselves for the better of the Clan."

Crowpaw looked at Ivy and was shocked by her gaze. Her green eyes were filled with a sense of wonder. "Do cats really go up to StarClan when they die?" Her voice trembled with awe. "Have you seen a StarClan cat?"

"I haven't," Crowpaw's head dropped. *But I have cats who are in StarClan.* "But I know others that have. Clans also have a medicine cat, they are trained in herbs but also speak with StarClan on a regular basis. StarClan communicate through medicine cats and leaders to try and help the Clans."

"Have you lost any loved ones?" Ivy asked, her voice dropping.

"Yes." Crowpaw stared at his paws. "My father died in battle." His voice trembled and Crowpaw was filled with the familiar guilt and rage of his father's death. "That's part of the reason why I left."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." Ivy's voice was now sad, she stared at the sky with interest in her eyes. "What about your mother?"

My mother. Crowpaw tensed. "My mother...hates me." He heard a small gasp from Ivy. "My mother wanted a daughter, to name after her own mother and honor her memory. She had that daughter, my sister, Ravenkit. However, Ravenkit was born dead, and my mother blamed her death on me. She hates me for it and she blamed my father's death on me as well."

"Oh, Crowpaw." Ivy's voice trembled. He looked at her in alarm, hoping he didn't upset her. "That's so horrible to hear." Her green eyes were now clouded with sadness. "My mother, a she-cat named Heather, died not long after I was born so I don't really remember her. I remember she had big green eyes and looked like me. My

father didn't know what to do after she died, so he took me and did his best to raise me alone. He was so lost and didn't know what to do, until he met Raindrop. She was a kittypet at the time but she found us a place to stay. There was another cat there named Drizzle, an old, wise she-cat who knew of herb training. She's the one who taught me everything I know. She died two leaf-bares ago, she was essentially my mother, and so was Raindrop in a way." Ivy closed her eyes, her face filling with an expression of love and joy. "Raindrop eventually left her twolegs and started traveling with us after Drizzle died, then we slowly met all the other cats around her. I suppose I've had the luck of having three mothers who loved me, between Heather, Drizzle and Raindrop." She looked back at Crowpaw with sympathy in her eyes. "I apologize that you didn't the same experience. I understand your mother's loss must've been hard, but you didn't deserve to be treated the way you were."

Blue eyes flashed in Crowpaw's mind, he dropped his head. "That's not entirely true. I do know what it's like to have a mother". *If Riverlight won't be a mother to you, then I will.* Silverpool's voice echoed in his mind. He choked back a cry of sadness, his heart tore into pieces as he thought of the silver she-cat. "Silverpool was essentially my mother, she loved me so much." His voice trembled. "I miss her every day, she's the only reason I was able to stand on my own four paws after my father's death...and I left her behind."

Suddenly, Ivy was pressing against him. "Crowpaw." Her voice was soft and quiet in his ear. "If Silverpool truly loves you, then I know she won't blame you for leaving. You did what you had to do, and you're in a safe place now. I'll do everything I can to keep you safe so I can honor Silverpool, because without her I don't even know if you would be here and I am grateful to her for that."

Her works shook Crowpaw to his core, he had never expected such a response from Ivy but suddenly he felt like he was back with Silverpool. For the first time in so long he felt loved and protected, he pressed back against Ivy, his heart twisted and his mind racing. He didn't know much about this she-cat and he hadn't known her for very long, but she had already changed his world.

Chapter 21

Crowpaw and Ivy returned from their walk, and he felt like a lot had happened when in reality they had just shared their stories and yet now it felt like Crowpaw had known Ivy his whole life. As they walked back through the forest he found himself focusing on her every action. The way she walked, he paw steps were gentle and her eyes distant, as if her mind was somewhere else. Yet she knew exactly where she was going.

Crowpaw wondered what was going on in her mind as they walked, were her thoughts similar to his? He turned away from the she-cat and looked into the camp. Flint, Leo and their mates were talking while their kits played and Raindrop watched. Crowpaw remembered what Ivy said about Raindrop, how she was like a mother to her along with another cat named Drizzle. Something told Crowpaw that Raindrop was a queen at heart, didn't she have her own kits?

Crowpaw found himself meeting Raindrop's shocking blue gaze, the she-cat had such intense blue eyes. He almost found it unbearable, but there was something deep inside her gaze that Crowpaw couldn't name. For a moment, her gaze shifted over to Ivy who didn't seem to be aware. She was looking at the four kits as they played, with amusement in her eyes.

"Ivy," Raindrop spoke suddenly, looking at the tortoiseshell with kind eyes. "Were you just out hunting with Crowpaw?"

Ivy shook her head. "We went for a walk, but didn't catch anything. We just talked." She explained, Crowpaw feared for a moment that they would get in trouble for not catching anything.

Raindrop nodded and stood up. "Wonderful, because I want to go hunting with Crowpaw." The cats around, including Crowpaw all looked around in a bit of a shock. Crowpaw hadn't seen Raindrop go hunting in the entire time that he'd been here. Raindrop laughed, amusement flashing in her eyes. "What? I know how to hunt." She

flicked her tail. "Just because I normally care for kits doesn't mean I don't have any hunting ability." She brushed past the four cats and stepped in between Crowpaw and Ivy. "Ready?" She questioned. Crowpaw felt awkward and unsure of what to do.

He looked past Raindrop at Ivy, hoping to find some kind of help but the she-cat just chuckled and went to stand beside Sabra who watched on with interest. "Let's go, Crowpaw." Raindrop nudged Crowpaw towards the exit of camp. He had just gotten back, and wasn't sure why Raindrop wanted to hunt with him.

Crowpaw awkwardly followed her into the forest which wasn't as cold now that it was nearing sunhigh. He looked at Raindrop, the she-cat's eyes were almost the opposite of Ivy's. They were focused and certain, she knew what she was doing and where she was going. There wasn't a sense of curiosity to her, just a sense of certainty.

"So," Crowpaw mewed awkwardly. "Why did you want to hunt with me?" He shuffled his paws.

Raindrop looked at him, her eyes sparkling. "Because I want to get to know you. I know every cat in this group incredibly well. I like to know the cats I'm living with." Her eyes were steady. "Every cat has a story. I want to know those stories. When I do, I know the cats around me better."

"Ivy says that." Crowpaw said suddenly. "That every cat has a story."

Raindrop's eyes softened. "I'm not surprised. It wasn't me who taught her that, it was Drizzle who taught both of us. That cat had seen a lot of things in her lifetime, more than most of us ever will." Her icy blue eyes looked over Crowpaw. "But something tells me that you've seen a lot as well. I can see it in your eyes." She turned away, looking towards the sun. "You've seen loss, you've seen danger and you've seen something else recently."

"What do you mean?" Crowpaw tilted his head, suddenly intrigued by what Raindrop was saying.

"When you got here you had haunted eyes. They were dark and sad,

something heartbreaking to see in such a young cat." Raindrop turned back to him. "But recently I've noticed a change. You walk with your head higher and your eyes are brighter. Something tells me it has something to do with Ivy." Crowpaw's pelt burned and he avoided her gaze. Raindrop purred. "I know I'm right." She let out a happy sigh. "There's nothing wrong with that, Ivy is an incredible cat. I watched her grow up and she's seen a lot too. She has a curious mind, and she's curious in you." Crowpaw lifted his head, his heart starting to race. "I'm not going to tell you what to do with Ivy, just to follow your heart. Do what you feel is right."

A sudden realization hit Crowpaw. For a moment, it felt like he was talking to Silverpool. This she-cat reminded him so much of his former mentor, so much that he felt like he could trust her even though they just met. "Do you have kits?" He blurted. The expression on Raindrop's shifted, her eyes filled with love and sadness. "I mean," He stammered. "You always the kits here and you helped raise Ivy, but do you have your own kits?"

Raindrop closed her eyes, there was a peaceful look on her face. There was a sad moment of silence before she spoke. "Yes, I do have kits." She looked over her shoulder, past Crowpaw. "Though I don't know where they are."

"You don't?" Crowpaw tilted his head. "What happened to them."

"My twolegs." Her voice went slightly rigid. "Twolegs take the kits of queens and send them to new homes. I had three beautiful kits, and they were taken from me." Raindrop lowered her head, but her gaze was never pure sadness. "Cloud, Rye and Heron." Her eyes filled with love. "I fell in love with a cat named Pine and we had our kits. However, my twolegs took them away. I don't know where they ended up or even if their names are still the same."

Crowpaw remembered meeting the kittypet Sheba, and how she was taken away from her mother and sister. *Twolegs are heartless.*

"Then, I was taken to the vet." Her voice darkened.

"The vet?" The name sounded so strange on his tongue, and it sent chills up his spine.

"Sometimes, twolegs take their kittypets to the cutter. When these cats return, they are not the same. They're lazier and sleep more." She looked up. "But that's not the worst part." Crowpaw felt uneasy. "Because of that place, I can no longer have kits. I will never have my own children again." For the first time, sadness seemed to almost shatter Raindrop, but she shook her head. "I remained with my twolegs until Drizzle died and then I decided to follow Cooper and Ivy." She looked back at Crowpaw. "I may not be able to kits of my own, but that will never stop my love of caring for them. I helped raise Ivy and I always help with Starlight, Firefly, Finch and Buttercup. It helps me feel complete and to not feel so bad about my own lost kits."

"I'm so sorry you lost your kits." Crowpaw lowered his head. "And that you can no longer have anymore. Twolegs are horrible."

"They're not horrible." Raindrop's voice was low and soft. "They have the best intentions, but they can't understand us or sense our emotions. I keep going by thinking my kits are grown up and happy, living their own lives, even without me."

Crowpaw met Raindrop's gaze. *She makes it by when she thinks about her loved ones being happy.* He closed his eyes, thinking of Silverpool, Icepaw and Frostpaw. *I'm sure they're happy. They're living their Clan lives.* He imagined the three she-cats enjoying their lives, full of hunting and good prey, it made him feel better.

He opened his eyes and noticed that Raindrop was looking at him kindly. "Are you thinking of the ones you left behind?" Crowpaw nodded. "Tell me about them."

Crowpaw started off by talking about Silverpool, Icepaw and Frostpaw. Soon he found himself talking about Nightkit, Badgerkit and Dovekit and even Owlstar. He had talked about almost all the cats in MoonClan while Raindrop listened intently, her eyes glowing the entire time.

"You miss them all." Raindrop mewed. "And that's okay, it's great that you don't forget about them. You should always remember the ones who took care of you."

"I'm going to remember them." Crowpaw looked at his paws, feeling warmth spread throughout his entire body. "And I'm going to remember the cats around here too."

Raindrop's eyes reminded him of Silverpool's, they had a mother's tenderness to them, Crowpaw felt safe and comfortable around this she-cat. Raindrop stood up. "Now, we came out here to hunt so I suggest we hunt." Crowpaw agreed and the two began their search for prey. Raindrop surprised him once again with her hunting skills. She was as fast as a MoonClan cat. *Silverpool would love Raindrop.* Crowpaw couldn't help but think as he watched her hunt.

Both caught several pieces of prey to bring back to camp and when they returned, Crowpaw had an entirely new outlook on this group of cats. He spotted Flint and Sabra sharing tongues with love burning in their eyes. Leo was on his back while Finch and Buttercup climbed all over him and Rudy watched on with laughter. Ivy was sharing a piece of prey with her father and laughing about something.

He realized that Raindrop was the only one here without a blood relation. *Not anymore.* Crowpaw thought. *I don't have any blood here, but sometimes; the best family are the ones you don't share blood with.*

Chapter 22

"*I wanna train with Crowpaw!*" Starling cried, jumping around Flint, Rudy and Crowpaw. Crowpaw couldn't help but laugh at her energy and enthusiasm. Firefly was excited as well, but contained her energy in a much more controlled manner.

"And here I thought you wanted to learn from me." Flint flicked his tail playfully, pretending to be hurt.

"I do," Starling turned to face her father. "But Crowpaw is from a Clan! I wanna learn how Clan cats hunt!"

Crowpaw looked at Starling, wishing he could teach her more. He hadn't really spent much time as MoonClan apprentice. "Well," Crowpaw stood up. "Maybe I could teach you one of the things I learned, but I don't think you're quite old enough yet. He lifted his head to look at Flint. "How old are they?"

"They're a little older than five moons." Flint replied, looking at his kits with a gentle gaze.

"Where I'm from," Crowpaw turned his attention back to Starling. "Kits start their training at six moons old."

"But I'm not from there." Starling flicked her tiny tail. "I'm from here!"

"Doesn't matter," Flint extended his paw and pulled Starling in close along with Firefly. "Your mother and I say you're too young, so you're too young."

"Not fair!" Starling turned on her father, puffing out her black fur. She didn't look scary, she looked adorable. "Buttercup and Finch have started learning how to hunt!"

"Buttercup and Finch are two moons older than you." Flint tried to reason with his daughter, but it didn't seem to be working. The only

thing to draw Starling's attention away was the appearance of Sabra, who returned along with Leo and Cooper from their hunting trip.

"You're back!" Starling jumped away from Flint and bounded across the camp to her mother, weaving in and out of her legs. Sabra looked at Flint and purred.

"Need a break?" She purred.

"I've faced dogs, twolegs, rogues, and coyotes and nothing has wore me out more than being a father." Flint stood up and stretched out his legs. "But I do love them."

"We all do." Sabra walked with Starling back over to Flint. "But I understand needing a break," She looked at the cats grouped together. Flint, Rudy and Crowpaw. It's your turn to go out and hunt." Crowpaw looked at the fresh-kill pile where Leo and Cooper were setting down their kill. It was getting smaller with the day, the frigid air was starting to drive the prey away, hunting would soon become a struggle.

"We should get going then," Rudy stood up and touched her muzzle to Leo as they passed. Crowpaw and Flint followed, Crowpaw was eager to get his paws out into the forest and hunt. The cold was starting to grip the forest, and it was getting harder and harder to stay warm.

Crowpaw, Rudy and Flint went their separate ways to cover more ground, Crowpaw went towards the river, keeping his nose sharp for the scent of prey. It was difficult to pick through the burning scent of frost, but soon Crowpaw caught faint scent of vole. They weren't his favorite thing, but he knew Ivy liked them.

Crowpaw ducked down into a hunting crouch and began silently stalking his prey. He noticed some tiny tracks lined with the warm scent of the vole. With his body low to the ground, Crowpaw stalked the vole's scent until he spotted the creature digging at the semi-frozen ground. It was plump, it would serve as good prey.

Crowpaw took a few, silent breaths and stalked forward. He got as

close to the vole as possible until his catch was certain. Crowpaw leapt forward, his paws pinning the vole to the ground. It let out a small squeak but Crowpaw killed it with a swift bite to the neck. He lifted his head, satisfied with his kill. Crowpaw's stomach growled as the taste of blood hit his tongue, but he didn't dare eat his catch yet.

These cats didn't have the warrior code, but Crowpaw's heart still followed those rules. He was raised on those rules, and they guided the Clans peacefully. They continued to help Crowpaw beyond the borders.

Crowpaw heard a snapping twig, the sudden sound made him jump slightly. Crowpaw lifted his head and looked around, he knew that neither Rudy nor Flint would be so careless. He wondered if it was Ripper again, Crowpaw sniffed the air and caught the scent of rogue on the breeze. The fur along Crowpaw's spine rose and he extended his claws, prepared to fight.

There was a shuffle in the brush behind him, he spun around to face the noise. "Show yourself." Crowpaw hissed, baring his teeth. There was no response, but Crowpaw knew that something was lurking in the brush. He took a mild step forward, trying to stay aware of everything that surrounded him.

There was a quick noise behind him, he heard the skittering of pawsteps and Crowpaw whipped around, meeting the venomous green gaze of Ripper. In his jaws was Crowpaw's vole. "Hey!" Crowpaw snapped. "That's *mine*."

"Not anymore." A new voice and Crowpaw looked over his shoulder to see a she-cat stepping out of the brush. It was a lean, brown tabby she-cat with deep amber eyes. The one thing he noticed about her was one of her hind paws twisted inward at an unnatural angle with a deep scar running across her ankle. "Maybe you shouldn't let your guard down so easily."

Crowpaw bared his teeth. "Are rogues so useless that they can't even catch their own prey?"

Ripper lashed his tail. "It's so much more fun stealing from pathetic

scraps like you."

"Honorless rat." Crowpaw growled, both rogues were moving in close. He wondered if Flint and Rudy were close. *I can't fight both of them.*

"Be careful what you say freak." The she-cat grumbled, her long claws tearing at the frozen earth. "Every cat in the twolegplace is talking about you, how you came from the forest. I've heard all the stories."

"Yeah?" Crowpaw sneered. "What have you heard?"

"Forest cats are nothing but violent, selfish creatures who hoard the forest and prey to themselves."

"The cats I knew back in the forest are worth ten of you flea-bitten rogues. You know nothing about me or where I come from. Go back to eating crowfood off the streets like you belong."

"Watch your tongue." Ripper snapped. "Or I'll have to claw it out of your head."

"Try it." Crowpaw held his head high, he had to act confident around these rogues. He couldn't let them sense any fear. "It will be the last thing you ever do." Slight movement caught Crowpaw's eyes and through the trees he caught Rudy's sharp gaze. She had her eyes set on the she-cat. She gave Crowpaw a nod, he assumed that Flint was here as well. *They're here.*

"Such a big threat coming from such a little kit." Ripper dropped the vole and raised his lip, exposing broken, rotten teeth. "Why don't you put your claws where your words are!" Ripper leapt forward, Crowpaw braced himself for impact but saw a blur of gray as Flint and Rudy dived out from either side of Crowpaw and the rogues.

Flint jumped and knocked Ripper to the ground, the rogue rolled through the leaves and quickly scrambled back to his paws. Hissing violently and ducking his head. Rudy quickly shot around the back of Crowpaw as the she-cat tried to attack Crowpaw. Crowpaw twisted on his paws as Rudy pinned the she-cat to the ground.

"Vile she-cat." Rudy growled.

"Disgusting forest cat!" The loner hissed and sank her claws into Rudy's shoulders, raking her claws down her forelegs. Rudy hissed and backed off, letting the rogue up. She stumbled back on her twisted paw. She lashed the air, threatening another attack.

"Twist!" Ripper called as he squirmed away from Flint. "Let's go." He met Crowpaw's gaze, there was bloodlust burning deep inside of them. "This isn't over, you be sure to tell Cooper that. He can't hoard the prey forever."

Twist limped away from Rudy to Ripper's side, she looked over shoulder. "We'll take the prey if we have to, and we'll slaughter any cat who gets in our way."

"Yeah, right." Rudy rolled her eyes. "Run back to the twolegplace!" Twist hissed sharply before the two of them vanished towards the twolegplace.

"Yikes." Flint shook his pelt. "Ripper is acting more hostile than usual."

"I think he means what he says." Crowpaw mewed, staring after Ripper and Twist. "They're going to try and drive us out."

"I'd like to see him try." Flint snorted.

Crowpaw forced himself to turn away from the direction of the twolegplace and face Flint and Rudy. "We need to tell Cooper, they're probably going to attack us. Who knows how many rogues he has behind him."

"I guess." Flint didn't seem convinced, but Rudy nodded her head.

"Grab your vole and let's go home."

Chapter 23

Crowpaw, Rudy and Flint arrived back at camp after a short walk, Leo spotted the trio and quickly padded up, looking at Rudy's wounds. They weren't deep and stopped bleeding during the walk, but they looked nasty. "What happened?" Leo questioned, looking at his mate with concern brewing deep in his eyes.

"Ran into Ripper and one of his rogues." Rudy explained. "Crowpaw thinks they're trying to start a fight."

Leo tensed and looked at Crowpaw. "You do?"

Crowpaw nodded. "Both of them threatened us, they think we're hoarding the prey."

"Which we're not." Flint put in. "They're mouse brained, we barely have enough prey to keep ourselves fed."

"Hunting is probably harder in the twolegplace." Crowpaw pointed out. "They keep picking fights with us and think that *we're* the hostile ones." He sighed. *I don't know what to do here.* He thought. *This would be like if LichenClan was trying to steal our prey, but these aren't Clan cats. There's no borders, no warrior code.* "We should talk to Cooper."

"I'm pretty sure he's sharing prey in his den with Ivy." Leo pointed out, he nudged Rudy with his large muzzle. "You should have Ivy treat your injuries."

"I will." Rudy purred. "Come on," She motioned at Crowpaw who followed behind her. He felt nervous about talking to Cooper, he was a leader, yes, but what would he do? Rudy and Crowpaw stepped into the den. "Cooper?" She called in as they walked in.

Sure enough, Cooper and Ivy were sharing a vole. Ivy looked up, her eyes sparkling at Crowpaw, for a moment he forgot why he even came here. "What is it?" Cooper's eyes travelled to Rudy's leg.

"What happened to you?"

"Ripper." Rudy replied. "He and another rogued tried to steal the vole that Crowpaw caught, we chased them off but they threatened us."

"Threatened?" Cooper narrowed his eyes. "How so?"

"They told us that we couldn't keep hoarding the prey, and they said they're going to take it and slaughter any cat who gets in their way." Ivy tensed as Crowpaw spoke.

"I see." Cooper flicked his tail and stared at his paws for a long time, after a moment he lifted his head. "Ivy, go treat Rudy's wounds. Crowpaw, we're going to discuss this with the others."

Ivy nodded and looked at Rudy. "Let's go, it doesn't look bad but we don't want any infection." As Ivy walked out of the den, her pelt brush against Crowpaw's, leaving sparks along his fur. He wasn't sure if she intended to do that or not. Crowpaw noticed Cooper staring at him suspiciously. *Did he notice that?* Crowpaw and Cooper followed them out, but went into the clearing.

Cooper sat down and raised his voice. "Can I have everyone's attention?" The scattered loners looked up from what they were doing to focus on Cooper, Crowpaw felt awkward sitting next to him so he moved to sit beside Raindrop. "Rudy, Crowpaw and Flint got into a scrape with Ripper and another rogue and in this fight they threatened to attack us and take our prey, and said they wouldn't hesitate to kill us."

Sabra wrapped her tail around Starlight and Firefly, alarm flashing in her eyes. *That's right, these rogues don't follow a code. They'll kill kits.* Crowpaw shuddered at the thought. *I won't let that happen.*

"We need to decide what to do." Cooper continued.

"We have no idea how many rogues they have behind them." Raindrop called out. "We are a very small group, and we have four kits to protect."

"I was thinking the same thing." Cooper nodded. "It may be best for

us to relocate."

"*What?"* Crowpaw couldn't stop himself from speaking out. "You're going to leave?" He stared at Cooper. "This is our home!"

"It's frustrating, yes, but it's not worth a fight."

Crowpaw flattened his ears. "Of course it is." Crowpaw stood up, lashing his tail. "You've lived here for how long? Ivy was raised here! Those four kits were born here, they should grow up here!" Cooper narrowed his eyes slightly. "Clans fight for their territories, they aren't simply driven out by a group of scrawny rogues.

"We aren't a Clan, Crowpaw." Crowpaw couldn't help but notice Cooper raised his lip slightly at him. "We're loners who work together."

"I know you're not a Clan." Crowpaw argued. "But that doesn't mean you should let rogues drive you out!" He looked around, the cats were listening intently to him. He turned back to Cooper. "I'm not telling you to make borders or turn into a Clan, I'm just asking you to defend what you've built here. Fight back! Prove what's yours, prove to them that you'll not be easily scared off. We're not prey, we're cats. We fight, we don't turn tail and run."

Cooper closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath, it almost looked like he was trying to calm himself down. *Did I make him mad?* Crowpaw wondered briefly, he took a small step back. Cooper opened his eyes, Crowpaw found himself unable to read the tom's expression. "As always, I don't speak for everyone here." He lifted his head. "We'll hold a vote." Crowpaw sat down. *I get to vote too.* Cooper looked over his shoulder, Ivy and Rudy were standing in the entrance of Ivy's den, they had probably heard the entire conversation.

"Those in favor of fighting stand up." Crowpaw instantly stood up, he looked over his shoulder and saw that he wasn't alone. Every other loner in the clearing was standing, their eyes shimmering.

"This is our home." Sabra mewed from where she stood. "Crowpaw's right, we should fight for it."

Cooper stared down Crowpaw, but he held his ground. *I understand not wanting to fight, but this is my home too! I was raised as a warrior, and warriors don't turn their backs on a fight, not even MoonClan cats.*

"Very well," Cooper dipped his head. "I will fight alongside you, but we need a plan." He rested his eyes on Crowpaw. "Since this was your idea, you can come up with one."

Crowpaw tensed slightly, he had to come up with a battle plan? He swallowed nervously, and took a deep breath to clear his mind. *I can do this.* "First of all," Crowpaw addressed the rest of the rogues. "We need to figure out what we're up against. I suggest some of us venture into the twolegplace and try and find out how many rogues are rallying behind Ripper."

"I know the twolegplace the best." Raindrop spoke up. "I can go."

"I'll go too." Crowpaw offered. "Two of us should be enough, we're just there to learn." Crowpaw looked over the four kits. "We need to hide the kits, rogues won't hesitate to hurt them."

"Me and Ivy can guard them." Rudy offered, approaching the crowd with Ivy on her tail. "We'll keep them in Ivy's den and we'll fight any rogues who get near. That way, Ivy also has quick access to her herbs in case one of us gets badly hurt."

"I have a suggestion," Sabra looked up from her kits. "While you two are in the twolegplace, perhaps you could get some other loners to help us. If we're up against more rogues than we can handle, we could offer them a safe place to live and hunt in return for them fighting for us." Sabra looked over at Cooper who was watching silently. "If that's okay with you."

"I do not control you," Cooper spoke. "I told Crowpaw to figure out a battle plan, I will follow his word. If we find some cats who wish to join us, then I'll allow it as long as they help."

"We should get some extra training in." Flint added. "We need to make sure we're ready."

"We should also have a nightly guard." Leo suggested. "Someone to

keep watch so they ambush us while we're sleeping."

Crowpaw couldn't help but think that they were truly acting like a Clan. *We're small, but we won't be toyed with!* "We should get to the twolegplace as soon as possible," Crowpaw mewed, turning to Raindrop. "When will you be ready?"

"I'm ready now if you are."

"Be safe." Ivy mewed. "We don't want you two against all those rogues."

"We'll be safe." Crowpaw promised with a purr. He held Ivy's gentle gaze for a long moment before he and Raindrop set out into the forest.

They ventured deep into the trees, and Crowpaw's paws tingled. This *had* to work, he could tell that Cooper wasn't happy with him. *I have to prove to Cooper that we can fight and win this, we have to.*

"You and Ivy seem to be as close as ever." Raindrop's voice pulled Crowpaw's head out of the clouds. His pelt burned at the comment.

"Oh, yeah, I suppose." He dropped his head. "Ivy's great."

"Why don't the two of you just come out and be mates already? Everyone can see it."

Crowpaw flattened his ears. "I don't know." He sighed. "I don't think Cooper is very happy with me right now, he kept glaring at me the entire time."

"Cooper is an old cat who doesn't like change." Raindrop explained. "When Heather died, he dedicated everything to keep Ivy safe. He is very protective over her, you can't blame him. He doesn't want to put her in danger, and this fight is going to put all of us in danger."

"I just can't leave, it's not who I am." Crowpaw told her. "We have every right to live here, we never gave them any issues. We shouldn't just run away." *I've already done too much running in my life. I'm not running again.*

"You are a very passionate cat, Crowpaw." Raindrop mewed softly. "Despite being so young, you seemed to take charge quite well. You are a natural leader."

Crowpaw blinked, being a leader is something that never crossed his mind. "I suppose." He muttered, not sure what to say next. Being a Clan leader was a thing of the past for him, and he wasn't look to lead this group of rogues. *I don't need to be a leader, I just want a safe place to live.*

Raindrop let the conversation go and the two of them arrived at the border of the twolegplace, Raindrop's blue eyes scanned the area. "Follow me, I'm taking us to a twoleg nest. There's two very kind kittypets who live there."

Crowpaw followed Raindrop as the queen snuck her way into the twolegplace, staying silent, yet moving quickly. *She's done this before.* Crowpaw noted, and kept following her until they reached a twoleg nest. It was tall and a pale yellow, Crowpaw caught a sweet scent on the air as they neared but he couldn't quite place what it was.

Raindrop jumped on the fence, Crowpaw didn't know how she could be comfortable. Even after everything he had done, Crowpaw still hated twolegs. Raindrop let out a quiet meow, and kept doing so until they spotted movement. Crowpaw lowered himself closer to the ground, tensing until he saw two heads pop out from around the nest.

One was a mostly black tom with a white belly and paws, the other was a mostly white she-cat with several black spots. Both of them wore brightly colored tendrils around their necks that jingled when they moved. "Good afternoon." Raindrop greeted.

"Hello there, Raindrop." The she-cat mewed, then rested her eyes on Crowpaw who hadn't ventured closer yet. "Who's this?"

"This is my friend, Crowpaw." Raindrop purred. "He's not used to housefolk." Raindrop motioned with her tail at the kittypets. "Crowpaw this is Lou and Lola, they're good kittypets."

Crowpaw relaxed slightly and approached the fence. "What brings you two to our home?" Lou questioned, licking a forepaw. "You usually don't come around these days."

"That's because I've taken up a home in the woods." Raindrop explained. "I live with a few other cats. You know Ripper, right?"

Both kittypets nodded. "That dreaded rogue?" Lola shuddered. "He creeps around here all the time, but lately he's been hanging out with a bunch of other rogues. They always look at us like we're food."

"Do you know how many other rogues?" Crowpaw questioned.

Lou thought for a moment. "There's a brown she-cat with a broken paw, Twist is her name, I think. Then there's Mint, Oak, King and a few others I think. I don't know all their names, but they all look mean. We try to avoid them."

"They're trying to drive us away." Raindrop explained. "We're trying to find out how many of them they're are, so thank you for that information."

"No problem." Lola purred.

"By the way, you two wouldn't happen be dreaming of living in the forest would you?" Raindrop questioned hopefully.

Both of them shook their heads. "No thanks, we like our housefolk." Lola mewed. "But I bet there's a few cats around here who will. There's a few loners who come by, you should ask them."

"There's Peach, she's a sweet little loner but has some sharp claws on her. She got into a fight with Mint and sent the rogue running back into the streets." Lou mewed. "There's also Omega, he's a quiet loner, and has some nasty scars, but maybe he'd like to get out into the forest."

"Oh, and Merlin too. He lives on the edge of the twolegplace, he's kind but I've seen him defend himself before. You should ask him too."

"We will be sure to do that." Raindrop bowed her head. "Thank you for all your help."

"Of course!" Lola chirped. "Come and visit us again soon, Raindrop!"

Raindrop and Crowpaw started walking away from Lou and Lola's nest, Crowpaw felt more enlightened by their information. "I think it's safe to assume that Ripper's group is as big, or even bigger than ours. So getting some extra paws will be good."

"Let's try and find these loners."

Raindrop and Crowpaw skirted along the edge until they came across a lean white tom. He had a long scar that nearly wrapped around his whole muzzle, and another one that went down his shoulder onto his foreleg. "Think that's Omega?" Crowpaw questioned.

"There's only one way to find out." Raindrop stepped out of the shadows and Crowpaw followed her. As they approached, the white tom turned to face them. He bared his teeth and showed his claws, but it seemed more defensive than hostile.

"How many times to have to chase you rogues off?" He spat.

"We're not rogues." Raindrop explained. "My name is Raindrop, and this is Crowpaw. Are you Omega?"

He flattened his ears. "What do you want from me?"

"We're currently under threat from a rogue named Ripper, do you know who he is?"

The tom snorted. "Of course I do." He lashed his tail. "How do you think I got this ugly scar on my face." *Is there any cat here who Ripper hasn't hurt?* "If you're not rogues, then who are you? Where do you come from?"

"We live out in the woods." Crowpaw replied. "We live in kind of a small group, we hunt and provide for each other. We're not hostile, but Ripper seems to think we are. He's going to try and drive us away."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"We're trying to get some help, in exchange for helping us defend our home, you can live alongside us. We hunt for each other, provide safety and food. You can come and go as you please, but there's plenty of us there to give you a home."

The tom narrowed his eyes, but he seemed to be thinking it over. "Do you have a cat who tells you what to do?"

Raindrop shook her head. "We have Cooper, who sort of acts like a leader for us, but he doesn't control us. It's just a safe haven for loners."

"I'll think about it." Omega sat down. "If I come by tomorrow morning, then you'll have my answer."

"Thank you," Raindrop dipped her head. "Even if you fight with us, you don't have to join us. We're just looking for some help."

Omega just nodded and Raindrop and Crowpaw continued on their way. They came across a cream-colored she-cat hunting along the twolegplace. "Excuse me," Raindrop called out to her. The she-cat looked up, she looked on edge but didn't look like she was going to attack. "Are you Peach?"

The she-cat flicked her tail. "Who's asking?"

Raindrop went on to introduce her and Crowpaw and explained the entire situation with Ripper. After she finished, Peach scratched her ear. "Sure," Crowpaw was shocked that she agreed so easily. "These flea-bitten rogues have been making my life a huge pain lately. I may not look it, but I can leave some nasty scars. Just ask Mint." Peach tilted her head. "Can I come with you now?"

"I don't see why not." Crowpaw mewed and they moved on ward. With Peach's help, they were able to locate their next target, a cat named Merlin. When Crowpaw saw Merlin he was uncertain that this cat could help. The tom had long, fur with shredded ears and gray growing against his white pelt.

He was old, so Crowpaw wasn't sure he could fight, but there

wisdom written all over his face. "Been a while since I've seen new faces around here." He mewed. "Who are you?"

"My name is Raindrop, and this is Crowpaw."

"Crowpaw, huh." Merlin purred. "I never heard a name like that before."

"Most cats haven't."

"You're not from here, are you?"

Crowpaw shuffled his paws. "No, I come from far away. How can you tell?"

"The way you speak," Merlin waved his fluffy tail. "Your voice is different from the cats around you. I'd love to learn about where you come from, but something tells me that's not what you came here for."

Raindrop shook her head and once again detailed everything that was going on with Ripper. "I would love to assist you." Merlin mewed.

"You would?" Crowpaw mewed.

Merlin nodded. "Don't let my gray fur deceive you, I still have plenty of fight in me. I've lived just about every life you could imagine, kittypet, loner, rogue, all of it. Though I've never lived in a group like you've described, it sounds nice to be surrounded by such friendly cats, plus I wouldn't mind giving these rogues a taste of my claws. They're nothing but trouble makers."

"That means a lot." Raindrop bowed her head and turned to Crowpaw. "Shall we go? We have a lot of training to do." Crowpaw agreed and with two new cats with them, they set back home. *We can do this. I know we can.*

Chapter 24

Crowpaw watched the group of loners as they shared conversations and laughed. He couldn't help but feel proud of himself. In the few days since Peach and Merlin had followed Raindrop and Crowpaw home, they had settled right in. Omega had also showed up the following morning, he seemed to be struggling a little more to fit in, but the cats had welcomed him and he was a great hunter.

"It's been nice having some new faces around." Ivy purred, sitting beside Crowpaw as he watched his friends. "Last new face was yours, you're old news now."

Crowpaw chuckled. "They seem a lot more interesting than me."

"I don't know," Ivy nudged him. "A cat who talks to the stars and swims in rivers is pretty interesting." Crowpaw laughed along with Ivy and they continued sharing their squirrel. Crowpaw turned his head when he spotted movement coming from Cooper's den. He caught the leader's gaze and he couldn't help but feel unnerved by it. *I'm really starting to think that Cooper doesn't like me.*

Crowpaw dropped his head. *He seemed like he did.* He glanced over at Ivy who was still watching the others. *Is it really because of her? I care so much for Ivy, and she's not a kit. She can make her own choices.* Cooper started walking towards the two of them, Cooper rested his eyes on Ivy. "May I speak with you for a moment."

"Sure." Ivy purred and stood up, looking at Crowpaw. "I'll see you in a bit." She and Cooper padded into her den and Crowpaw rolled his eyes slightly. *Anything to keep us apart.*

Crowpaw wasn't far from the den, and he could hear their voices, he wasn't trying to eavesdrop but he couldn't help but strain his ears to listen. "Ivy, I don't know how to feel about this battle. How can we be sure that these rogues don't have a huge amount of cats behind them."

"Peach said that there's not that many rogues in the twolegplace, even less who will be willing to help a cat like Ripper." Ivy replied. "Crowpaw knows what he's doing, he grew up in a place that fought battles all the time."

"Didn't Crowpaw lose his father in a battle." Crowpaw's entire body went rigid as Cooper mentioned Blacksky. "I'm not about to risk losing you."

"You won't." Ivy assured him. "I'm not a kit, I know how to use my claws. Plus, Crowpaw has been teaching me extra fighting moves. Warrior fighting moves!"
"You're *not* a warrior, Ivy." Cooper's voice was lined with anger.

"What's your problem with Crowpaw? You invited him here and yet it seems like everything you see him you wanna claw his ears off. He's a great cat, he's a good hunter and he's so kind. Everyone here loves him and trusts him, myself included." Crowpaw's pelt burned. *Ivy loves me? Is it* that *kind of love...or a friendship love?*

"Crowpaw has been great to have around, yes, and I don't regret invited him to join us, but I did not invite him here to seduce my daughter and run off to the Clans with her!" *Does he think I'm going to do that?*

"Is that what this is about?" Ivy was starting to sound annoyed, Crowpaw had never heard her sound like that. "I'm not a helpless kit, how many times do I have to tell you that? Whatever is going on between me and Crowpaw is *none* of your business. I understand you love me, and that you're scared to lose me but I need you to trust me to make my own decisions."

"Ivy--"

"No, I'm done talking to you." Crowpaw quickly turned his attention back to the squirrel and took a bite. Ivy padded out of her den, looking incredibly annoyed. She sat down beside Crowpaw and stared at the ground. He had never seen her look so troubled.

"Everything okay?"

Ivy nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." She took a small bite of the squirrel. "Don't worry." She looked at Crowpaw, the annoyance fading away and her green eyes sparkling, making Crowpaw's heart race.

Crowpaw and Ivy spent the rest of the day together, and Crowpaw took the time to reflect on his and Ivy's relationship. He had strong feelings for her, he wanted to spend every waking moment with her then dream of her when he closed his eyes. *She's the greatest thing that's ever happened to me.*

As night rolled around Crowpaw looked longingly as Ivy padded into her den, he didn't want to sleep alone, he wanted to sleep beside her. He wanted to breathe in her sweet scent all night long and feel her warmth on the freezing night. *I need to tell her how I feel.* Crowpaw thought, his heart aching for her. *Soon.* Crowpaw told himself and padded into his own den, casting a glance at Leo was taking the night watch and eventually curled up into his nest.

Crowpaw dreamt of a field. He stood in the middle of it, breathing in the scent of flowers and grass. He looked around, trying to figure out where he was. There was nothing as far as he could see, just flat grass. *Where am I?* He wondered and started walking forward, hoping to find anything.

Behind Crowpaw he heard a strange call, he whipped his head around and saw a crow circling overhead. Beneath it sat the unknown tortoiseshell she-cat that he had seen in his dreams before. Her eyes were mossy green and curious as they rested on Crowpaw. "Who are you?" He called out.

The she-cat said nothing, she just shook her head and her pelt started to fade away. "Wait!" Crowpaw started running towards her, but by the time he reached where she had been sitting, she was gone. His breathing was heavy and fear started to creep in. *What's happening to me?* Crowpaw questioned himself, he felt like he was going crazy.

Rogues! A deep voice sounded from beyond the field. *Rogues attacking!* Crowpaw's eyes went wide as he recognized the voice. "Leo!" Crowpaw shot up in his nest and scrambled out of his den where rogues had started to invade their little camp. The loners

were already defending their home.

Sabra wrestled with a white she-cat who had a long scar down the side of her face. Her white pelt had splotches of blood on her white pelt, but Sabra seemed unharmed. Crowpaw ran into the fight, spotting a golden brown tabby tom. He jumped onto his back and sank his claws deep into the rogue's shoulders.

The tom snarled in pain and did his best to buck Crowpaw off, but Crowpaw held on tightly. *He doesn't know the correct counter to this move.* Crowpaw raised one paw and brought it down hard on the rogue's head. Crowpaw then jumped forward, off the rogue's head and landed in front of him.

He spat and lashed out with his claws, raking them across the tom's face. He stumbled back and shook his head, sending blood spraying across the ground. "Rat!" He spat and charged forward, ready to attack Crowpaw again.

Crowpaw shot to the side, avoiding any attack that the rogue might bring. He shot forward, slamming his body into the tom's side and sinking his teeth into his shoulder. The tom ripped away from Crowpaw's teeth, making his wound worse. Crowpaw's heart was racing, he hadn't felt the heat of battle since Blacksky died. *I'm not going to let any of the cats I care about die here!*

Crowpaw heard a shrill cry that sent pain through his heart. He whipped around, ignoring the rogue he was fighting and spotted Ripper. He had his back to Crowpaw and was cornering someone. Crowpaw's blood turned to ice when he realize who it was. *Ivy!* Ivy cowered before Ripple, hissing and lashing out with her claws. Behind her was the four kits.

"I'm not going to let you hurt these kits!" Ivy yowled.

"Then I'll just kill you to get to them. You're Cooper's daughter right? Your death will break him and he'll *never* show his face around here again!"

I don't think so. Crowpaw charged forward, he could feel his MoonClan blood running through his veins as he ran as fast as he

could. Crowpaw jumped on Ripper's back and started slashing at his back. Ripper howled in pain and reared up on his hind legs, causing Crowpaw to fall to the ground. He clearly had more skill than his other rogues. Crowpaw jumped to his paws as quick as he could and braced himself for Ripper's claws.

The rogue clawed his cheek, but it wasn't deep as Crowpaw jumped backwards. "I'm going to make you regret ever coming here, forest cat!" Ripper spat and dived forward, his body colliding with Crowpaw's.

Crowpaw stood his ground, moving against Ripper and digging his claws into the rogue's flank. Ripper was thin and underfed, his claws cut through Ripper's pelt like cobwebs. Crowpaw felt teeth in his shoulder, dangerously close to his neck. Crowpaw kept slashing at Ripper's thin pelt until the rogue finally let go.

Crowpaw's wound hurt, but it wasn't bad. Crowpaw bared his teeth and shot forward. He recalled a move that Silverpool had taught him, he had only practiced it once but he wouldn't mess it up. *My life depends on it.* Crowpaw dropped to the ground and slipped underneath Ripper.

He battered the rogue's belly, blood splattered across his muzzle and Ripper jumped up and spun around on his paws. Crowpaw had to act quick as his own belly was exposed. He flipped over and jumped to his paws in time to avoid Ripper's next attack. Ripper's pelt was shredded and his gray tabby pelt was stained crimson with his own blood.

"Perhaps I underestimated you." Ripper spat, his stance looking shaky.

"Yeah, you did." Crowpaw stepped forward, speaking boldly. "But not just me, you underestimated every loner here. We don't control this forward, and you were told that you couldn't hunt here. *You're* the one who started this fight, it didn't have to be a war."

"I'll never hunt alongside cats like you." Ripper lashed his tail. "But I'm not going to die for you pieces of fox-dung."

Ripper turned and ran into the forest, it didn't take long for the other rogues to follow suit and left the clearing. While Crowpaw had been fighting Ripper, Ivy had ran along with the kits to her den. Crowpaw looked over the crowd, the only serious wounds seemed to be a deep scratch on Raindrop's flank and a bloody scar across Peach's muzzle.

"We did it!" Flint lifted his head. "We drove those rogues away! They'll never mess with us again!"

Crowpaw felt a rush of pride wash over him. *I convinced them to battle, and we came out on top.* The cats around him celebrated in joy, Ivy stepped out of her den with the four kits around her. They pounced over to their parents and Ivy looked at Crowpaw with shimmering eyes.

She had dried blood down the side of her head, Crowpaw hated that she had been wounded but it was clear that Ivy was still standing tall. The moonlight shimmered across her beautiful pelt and Crowpaw felt love sick. *What an amazing cat.*

"I have to say, Crowpaw," Crowpaw had been so infatuated with Ivy that he hadn't seen Cooper approach him. "Your plan worked out better than I thought." He looked over the loners. "Perhaps those warriors of yours know what they're talking about."

"We're not warriors." Crowpaw mewed. "I'll never be a warrior, and I'm okay with that." He looked up at Cooper. "I'm not ready to give this home up, and this home is worth fighting for." Cooper nodded slowly.

"For such a young cat you're quite wise." Cooper mewed, standing up. "Perhaps one day you could be leading this little band of loners." With a wave of his tail, Cooper padded over to Ivy to make sure that she was okay. *I don't think so.* Crowpaw thought. *I'm happy right where I am.*

Chapter 25

"Keep your tail tucked in." Crowpaw instructed. "And keep your head low along with your body."
"She looks like a duck!" Firefly joked as Starling struggled to get a hunting crouch.

"Be nice, Firefly." Sabra scolded her daughter while Starling corrected herself. The two kits were old enough to learn how to hunt and as Starling had requested, Crowpaw was helping to train her. It had been nearly a moon since they defended against the rogues. In that time, Buttercup and Finch had also started learning to hunt and were not hunting alongside their parents. Omega, Peach and Merlin had also joined the group permanently and even Omega was starting to adjust to his new life.

Omega and Flint bonded over their antics in the twolegplace and had become quite good friends while Peach made friends with Ivy and Raindrop and Merlin seemed to befriend just about everyone and in Crowpaw's opinion, he had the best stories of any cat he had ever met.

"I think that's enough hunting for today." Sabra mewed as Starling failed another hunting attempt.

"But I almost got it!" Starling argued. "Please, let me continue!"

Sabra shook her head. "Sorry girls, but the sun will be setting soon and Crowpaw has some actual hunting to get done. We'll get started first thing tomorrow morning."
"*Crowpaw!*" Starling turned to Crowpaw. "Can we *please* stay and hunt longer?"

"Sorry," Crowpaw shook his head. "Mother says no, and every cat knows not to argue with a queen."

"I knew you were smart, Crowpaw." Sabra purred and nudged her kits forward. "Come on now girls, it's getting cold." Snow had

started falling slowly across the forest, it wasn't a lot but it was certainly chilly out, too cold for kits. Crowpaw followed Sabra and her disgruntled kits back to camp.

Crowpaw glanced up at the night sky, his heart aching as he saw the full moon. *The Clans will be gathering tonight.* Crowpaw felt a longing to be out in the forest, so without telling anyone he headed back out into the forest. He padded through the trees until he reached the river, and by the time that he did, the moon was shimmering high above.

Crowpaw sat on the river bank, staring up at the beautiful moon. Something about full moons always made him feel homesick, maybe it was because he knew that every cat he ever knew and loved was staring up at the exact same moon. Crowpaw sighed and stared at his reflection in the water.

I'm happy here. Crowpaw told himself. *But why do I still get so homesick?*

"You're gonna freeze to death out here, you know that right?" Crowpaw jumped and turned around to see who had spoken. It was Ivy, the beautiful she-cat stood in the moonlight. Crowpaw's heart jumped into his throat, he couldn't help but feel speechless everytime he saw her. "What are you doing out here? I saw you leaving, and you looked like you could use some company."

Crowpaw let out a small chuckle and sat back down, staring at the moon. "You know," Ivy mewed, sitting down beside Crowpaw. She sat close to him, their pelts brushed and Crowpaw stiffened but as he took in her warmth, he relaxed. "I always see you staring at the full moon with sadness in your eyes. Why is that?"

Crowpaw sighed. "The full moon is a big deal where I come from. I guess it just riles up my homesickness."
"What's so special about the full moon?" Ivy tilted her head. "It's beautiful, sure, but I don't see the significance."

"Every full moon, all four Clans meet under the stars to share the news of the past moon. It's our one night of a true peace, no cat is allowed to attack or argue as there is a truce decreed by StarClan."

Crowpaw couldn't help but be excited as he talked about the gathering. He had only ever been to one. "And once the leaders are done sharing their news, then all four Clans will share tongues and make friends. I only ever went to one, but they're one of the most exciting nights for any cat."

"Wow." Ivy breathed out, her breath billowing out in front of her. "That sounds amazing, the Clans seem so..strange." She laughed. "No offense."

"None taken," Crowpaw looked at his paws, his sadness returning. "Living as a Clan cat is unlike anything."
"Do you miss it?"

Ivy's question caught Crowpaw off guard, there was something sad in her eyes. *She thinks I'm going to leave.* "Yes, I do." He admitted. "There's a lot I never got to experience. I'll never earn my warrior name, and I'll never get to mentor an apprentice, but." He leaned in closer to Ivy. "I'm happy right here." She held his gaze, and Crowpaw found himself leaning in closer to her.

Without thinking, their tails intertwined and Crowpaw felt very hot despite the frigid night. At long last, their muzzles touched. "I'm happy with you, Ivy."

"I'm happy with you too, Crowpaw." Ivy replied, her sweet voice soothing Crowpaw's aching heart. "My whole life I've felt something calling to me, and now I realize that it was you. You've been the missing piece in my life."

"When I left my home, I didn't know what I was searching for, and I didn't think I'd ever find it, I didn't think I'd ever find my home. Yet, when I found you, I found both. I found everything. Wherever you are, Ivy, that's my home. That's where I belong."

"Oh, Crowpaw." Ivy nuzzled into Crowpaw's pelt, he got as close to her as he possibly could. *I finally found my home.* He thought. The two of them shared a long moment together until Ivy stepped back, her eyes shimmering. "I feel so happy, Crowpaw."

"Me too." He purred, standing up as well.

"I never thought I would find someone like you, and yet it feels like I've known you my whole life." Ivy nuzzled his cheek.

"I wonder what your father will think." Crowpaw chuckled nervously, he knew Cooper didn't like the idea of him and Ivy becoming mates. *It's too late now.*

Ivy shook her head. "It doesn't matter what he thinks. I want you, and that's all that matters." She playfully nudged Crowpaw. "Are you scared of him?"

Crowpaw snorted. "I'm not scared of anyone. Did you see how I fought Ripper? I tore his pelt to shreds."

"Oh yes," Ivy ducked down into a playful stance. "Everyone should fear the mighty warrior, Crowpaw!"

"You know it." Crowpaw playfully swiped at Ivy. She dodged his attack and jumped to the side, giving him a playful push. Crowpaw stumbled backwards, his hind paws slipping in the slick rocks that lined the river. He let out a squeak of alarm as he fell into the icy water. The water was frigid and took Crowpaw's breath away.

"Crowpaw!" He could hear Ivy's cry from underneath the surface of the water. Crowpaw swam gracefully to the river's surface, his head broke the water and he took a deep breath. He swam to the bank and climbed out of the river, his entire body shivering. "I'm sorry!" Ivy yelped and curled around him, he was very grateful for her warmth.

"Come on," She nuzzled Crowpaw. "Let's get you back to camp." Crowpaw walked back with Ivy, unable to stop himself from shivering or keeping his teeth from chattering. "So you really can swim." Ivy laughed.

"Yeah." Crowpaw breathed out through his shaking mew.

"You'll have to teach me some time." Ivy purred. "Once the water isn't ice cold." Crowpaw and Ivy arrived back at camp and were greeted by Raindrop.

"Oh my," Raindrop giggled. "I knew that you liked to swim, but

don't you think it's a little cold for that?"

"Very funny." Crowpaw shivered, flicking his tail. "I didn't *mean* to."

"Come on you," Ivy nudged Crowpaw forward. "We'll go to my den tonight."

They passed Cooper as they made their way to Ivy's den. "So you went for a swim, Crowpaw?" Cooper narrowed his eyes. "Perhaps you should get some rest."

"He will." Ivy said, intertwining her tail with Crowpaw's. "With me, I'll take good care of him tonight." Cooper didn't say anything, but his gaze was as frigid as the river. Ivy and Crowpaw left Cooper behind and walked the rest of the way to Ivy's den.

"Lay down." She motioned to her nest, beside it was a pile of scattered herbs. Crowpaw did as she said and she laid down beside Crowpaw. She began rasping her tongue over Crowpaw's wet fur. He closed his eyes, completely lost in the sensation. When Crowpaw's fur was dry, they curled up together, as close as they could be. Crowpaw breathed in Ivy's sweet scent and fell into the safe darkness of sleep, dreaming of his beautiful Ivy.

Chapter 26

Crowpaw sneezed, almost getting knocked off his paws. "You alright?" Flint questioned, looking up from the prey he had been burying.

"Yeah." Crowpaw mewed, his throat feeling dry and sore. "Think I have a cold from when I fell into the river." He twitched his tail. *I hope it's just a cold and not something more...severe.*

"Hopefully it's just that," Flint mewed. "I lost my sister to the winter's cough."

"The winter's cough?" Crowpaw tilted his head.

Flint nodded. "That's what I've always called it. It's a sickness that sits in your chest, it's super deadly during this season for kits and elders especially, but can kill anyone."

"I've always called it greencough." Crowpaw explained. "And we feared it back in the Clans as well."

"Whatever it's called, I don't want you or anyone else catching it. You should stay warm and inside your den." Flint nudged Crowpaw. "At least you've got a pretty she-cat taking extra good care of you."

Crowpaw's pelt burned against the cold, bitter air. "Yeah," He mewed. "I'm pretty lucky."

"Nothing like falling in love, is there?" Flint laughed. "I remember when I fell in love with Sheba. She was the only cat who could ever keep up with me, and yet she helped me slow down and appreciate life. Then she gave me two beautiful daughters, and my life was complete." Crowpaw admired Flint and Sheba's love. He was glad that he got to see several examples of true love in their case as well as Rudy and Leo. "So what about you two, are you going to be having kits anytime soon?"

Crowpaw stiffened. "Oh," He stammered. "I don't think so, I don't

think I'm quite ready for kits yet."

"Fair enough." Flint purred. "Just let me know when you do, I'll give you some tips."

"I wouldn't think of anyone better." Crowpaw laughed and the two of them continued with their hunting trip. Hunting had become incredibly difficult and after hunting from morning to sunhigh, they were only able to find two scrawny voles.

"I was hoping to find something more." Crowpaw complained, his voice strained. Talking hurt. *I'm getting worse.*

"We'll have to make it work," Flint mewed. "You should get back home to Ivy so she can take care of you. Crowpaw nodded, and as they neared camp, he started coughing. *This isn't good.*

They finally reached camp and Crowpaw's eyes searched for Ivy, she was looking over Sabra with concern in her eyes. Flint saw the same scene and dropped his vole before sprinting across the camp to his mate's side. "What's going on?"

"She's been coughing for a while." Ivy replied. "And her eyes and nose are streaming. She's sick."

Crowpaw's heart twisted, Flint's eyes filled with horror. "Can you treat her? You can treat her right?"

"I know how to treat basic coughs, Flint." Ivy stepped back, staring at her paws sadly. "I can give her that, but it hasn't worked before. Tansy didn't cure my mother." Her voice was low. "It didn't matter what Drizzle tried, nothing worked. I'll do everything I can Flint."

Flint dropped his head and nuzzled Sabra who looked scared. She looked at her kits who were being distracted by Leo and Rudy. She had pure love in her eyes. *They've accepted death.* Crowpaw realized. *I know what cures greencough, I just need to find some.* "I know what cures greenc--err, I know what will cure her cough."

Ivy and Flint lifted their heads. "You do? What is it?"

"It's called catmint." Crowpaw replied. "It's what we used back in

the Clans. We face this sickness every leaf-bare and that's what our medicine cats use." Crowpaw started coughing once he finished his sentence.

"Oh, Crowpaw, you're sick!" Ivy ran over to him. "She touched her muzzle to her forehead. "You're not as warm as Sabra, but full sickness isn't far off."

"I'm fine, Ivy, we need to go find this herb. You and me."

"But you're sick." She whimpered.

"I'll be alright, I know what it looks like."

"Where can you find some? Do you know?" Flint stepped forward.

"I know twolegs grow it a lot." Crowpaw mewed and thought for a moment. His mind flashed to when he and Raindrop ventured into the twolegplace, at Lou and Lola's home he has scented something sweet, something he couldn't name. "I know where we can find some."

"Are you sure?" Ivy questioned.

Crowpaw nodded. "Positive, but we need to go as soon as possible."

"Alright." Ivy nodded, determination filling her eyes.

"Where are you going exactly?" Cooper's loud voice rang through the entire air.

"The kittypet's Lou and Lola have catmint growing at their twoleg nest." Crowpaw explained. "We need it so that Ivy can cure Sabra's illness."

Cooper narrowed his eyes. "We don't have any time to waste." Ivy mewed. "We would've wanted this herb when my mother was sick." Her eyes were pleading and Cooper sighed. "Go on then, hurry up."

Crowpaw gave Cooper a thankful nod and the two of them ran out into the forest. The running was hard on Crowpaw, and he tried his best to stop from coughing. *We have to get this catmint. Those kits*

and Flint need Sabra.

Crowpaw soon spotted the border of the twolegplace and he and Ivy snuck their way inside, he was hoping to avoid seeing any rogues. Eventually they came to the pale yellow twoleg nest and the sweet scent of catmint filled the air. Before they could even start searching for it, Crowpaw spotted movement above. He lifted his head and saw Lou sitting in one of the small entrances to the den.

"Hey!" Lou called from above. "Crowpaw right? Who's the new she-cat."
"This is Ivy." Crowpaw quickly mewed. "I don't really have time to talk, you have an herb in your garden called catmint and we need it, it cures sick cats?"

"Catmint?" Lou thought for a moment. "You mean cat*nip?* Smells real good, absolutely heaven to play in."

"Y-yeah," Crowpaw nodded, he couldn't imagine *playing* in such a precious herb, but kittypets clearly had other uses for it. "We need some of it, can we take some?"

"Oh sure," Lou flicked his tail. "There's a surplus of it, more than enough for me and Lola."

"Thank you so much." Ivy dipped her head. "Where is it?"

Lou motioned with his head. "Around the back of the house, it might be covered in snow but it should still be good." Crowpaw and Ivy quickly rounded the nest where the scent was overwhelming.

"He wasn't kidding, it smells really good." Ivy mewed. Crowpaw stepped forward and swept the snow away, revealing tons of the precious herb.

"Grab as much as you can carry, we'll probably need more down the road." Ivy nodded and the two of them filled their jaws with catmint. Crowpaw's mouth watered, but it wasn't time for him yet. *I'll take some when we get back.*

Ivy and Crowpaw rushed back home, trying to move as quickly as possible. They reached the camp and were greeted excitedly by

Starling and Firefly. "Flint told us that you're gonna make our mother better." Firefly squeaked. "Is that true?"

Ivy nodded and bounded across camp, Crowpaw remaind close behind her. Ivy set her bundle down in front of Sabra, her eyes were dull and she lifted her head weakly. *Greencough has taken her quickly.* Crowpaw thought painfully. Ivy tore off a small leaf for Sabra. "Eat this."

Sabra slowly ate the catmint and sighed. "Thank you, Ivy. Hopefully this helps." Ivy nodded and looked at Flint.

"Take her back to your den and let her rest. I'll give her more tomorrow."

"Thank you so much, Ivy." Flint's eyes were incredibly grateful. "We're all lucky to have you."
"I do what I can, but I wouldn't even know what to do if it wasn't for Crowpaw." She looked down at her herbs. "Speaking of..it's your turn."

Crowpaw set down his own store and faced Ivy. He took a step forward and was suddenly overcome with a wave of dizziness. His world became uneven, and the clouds began to spin. "Wha..." Crowpaw felt his body fall to the ground and everything went black.

Chapter 27

Crowpaw opened his eyes slowly, his mouth was dry and his head felt heavy. *What happened to me?* He remembered getting the catmint for Sabra, but after that his memory was fuzzy. He lifted his head slowly, he was in Ivy's den. Her scent was all around him, but she was nowhere in sight. Crowpaw forced himself to stand, his entire body ached. Crowpaw let out a yawn and stepped into the harsh sunlight.

The wind was blowing slowly and the ground was covered in a thin layer of snowy powder. The loners were all sheltering close together, Leo watched Finch and Buttercup play in the snow, but Crowpaw's eyes scanned for Ivy.

He finally spotted his mate leaving Flint and Sabra's den, she had a sad look in her eyes. She said something to the members inside the den then turned, instantly catching Crowpaw's eye. "Crowpaw!" She ran across the camp, kicking up snow in her path. She came to a stop but slid slightly on the snow, bumping into Crowpaw. She nuzzled all over his pelt and Crowpaw breathed in her sweet scent. "I'm so glad you're okay!"

"What happened to me?" Crowpaw questioned, nuzzling Ivy in return.

"You collapsed and you were out for two days. You would wake up long enough to take some catmint, but then you would fall back asleep." She stepped back, dropping her head. "I was so scared I was going to lose you."

Crowpaw could hear the pain in her voice, he stepped forward and rested his muzzle on her head. "I'm not going anywhere. It's going to take a lot to take me away from you." Ivy lifted her head and touched her muzzle to Crowpaw's.

"Good. Cause I don't want to lose you, ever."

"You won't." Crowpaw purred.

Ivy's eyes sparkled once again. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore and thirsty, but I'm doing alright." Crowpaw assured her. "How is Sabra doing?"

"Much better thanks to the catmint." Ivy explained. "She should be back to herself in just a few short days."

"That's wonderful." Crowpaw mewed and looked around. He couldn't help but notice how painfully small the fresh-kill pile was. "Hunting still bad?"

Ivy nodded. "And with two of us out and me focusing on healing the two of you, it's been hard and what little prey we do have goes to the kits first."

"Understandable." Crowpaw nodded. "Do you think I'm well enough to go hunting?" He questioned.

"Maybe," Ivy looked over Crowpaw, touching her muzzle to his forehead. "You don't feel warm anymore, so you don't have a fever. Your eyes and nose are clear..." She rested her ear against his chest. "Breathe for me." Crowpaw took a feel deep breaths, they were strained but other than that he felt fine. "Your breathing sounds a little heavy, but you should be good."

"I want to get out hunting as soon as possible." Crowpaw mewed, and as he spoke he spotted Cooper, Rudy and Raindrop returning from camp. They had no prey and all looked incredibly disappointed.

"Nothing?" Leo lifted his broad head.

"No." Cooper sighed. "We need to figure something out, we have even more mouths to feed and--" He stopped himself when he spotted Crowpaw. "You're awake." He mewed and Crowpaw nodded.

"I'm better and I can get hunting as soon as possible."

Cooper shook his head slowly. "We should give the prey some time to come out, we nearly covered the entire forest from here to the twolegplace. Until then," Cooper raised his voice slightly. "We need to come up with a plan."

"Maybe we should try hunting farther out." Raindrop suggested. "There may be more prey, if we travel away from the twolegplace perhaps."

Leo shook his head. "That's where I came from, there's nothing but a big field for so long. Then there's another twolegplace."

"Wait--" Ivy stepped forward. "Isn't there a farm in that field?"

"What's a farm?" Crowpaw questioned.

"It's basically one twolegnest on a huge patch of land, they have all kinds of strange animals." Leo explained. "And yes, there is. What about it?"

"Drizzle took me to see that farm when I was younger." Ivy mewed. "There's chickens there, even during leaf-bare."

"Chickens?" Ivy was saying so many foregin words, Crowpaw had no idea what she was talking about.

"They're big, fat white birds. They're loud, but they don't do much. They can't really fly either."

"Why are you bringing this up, Ivy?" Cooper narrowed his eyes.

"Drizzle told me that cats would hunt those chickens and they provided great prey! If we got even one of them it would last us a whole moon!"

Crowpaw could see where Ivy was going with this, she wanted to hunt the chickens. "Is it safe?"

"I don't see why not." Ivy mewed with hope burning in her eyes. "If we go at night then the twolegs won't even see us! We get in, kill a chicken or two and get out."

"I don't know about this..." Cooper mewed, clearly concerned.

"I say we give it a shot." Crowpaw vouched for Ivy. "If it works, then it will be great food for all of us."

"And if it doesn't?" Cooper challenged.

"Then we'll just have to keep trying to hunt. Ivy said there's no danger, so we should give it a shot."

Cooper sighed heavily, but Leo stepped forward as well. "I think it's worth a try, Cooper. We could send out a hunting party tomorrow night to do some hunting."

"Do what you think is right." Cooper grumbled, twitching his ears in annoyance. "Decide your hunting party."

"I want to go." Crowpaw offered.

"Me too." Ivy put in, causing Cooper to tense.

"I'll go." Flint spoke up, stepping out of his and Sabra's den. "Sounds like a fun chase to me." His eyes sparkled.

"I'll go as well." Omega lifted his head.

"Me too!" Peach exclaimed from where she stood, eyes shimmering.

"I think we'll make a good party." Leo nodded. "I don't know much about chickens, but I know they're pretty big, about the size of a cat actually. If we work together we could take one down pretty quickly. They're gonna be heavy, so two of us should carry one together. This will be the easiest option. It should take the night to get it done, but when we get back, we should have plenty of prey."

"Are chickens dangerous?" Peach questioned.

"They have small beaks." Ivy replied. "They're sharp, but I doubt they could do much damage to us. Especially when we're so fast.'"

"Then it's settled." Leo nodded. "We'll set out tomorrow night, everyone should get a good long rest, because tomorrow we'll be as

well fed as a kittypet."

Chapter 28

"We should head out soon." Leo mewed, looking over the hunting party. "Where's Ivy?" He rested his eyes on Crowpaw.

"She said she had to get something from her den." Crowpaw replied, it was time for their chicken hunt and right before they left, Ivy insisted on doing something but Crowpaw wasn't sure what she was up to. His paws buzzed with excitement at the thought of this hunt, it was before sunset but Leo assured them by the time they reached this farm it would be nighttime.

"I'm coming!" Ivy called, Crowpaw looked over his shoulder to see Ivy trotting up to them with a green herb in her mouth. She set them down in front of the hunting party. "Everyone eat one of the leaves, they'll give you strength."

The rest of the patrol seemed unsure, but Crowpaw ate the herbs without hesitation, he trusted Ivy. They tasted bitter, but Crowpaw was able to swallow them. "Thank you, Ivy." He purred and Ivy's eyes sparkled.

After the rest of the party had eaten their herbs, Leo lifted his head. "Let's head out, it's going to be a long, cold walk to stay close and don't stop until we get there." They left camp behind, the rest of the group wishing them safe travels. Crowpaw glanced up at the sky as they walked, he could see the moon started to rise just above them. *Is StarClan looking over us? Can they even see us?*

Crowpaw shook his head, why would StarClan be watching him, he hadn't been a Clan cat in so long. *I'm relying on the cats around me tonight, together we'll feed our whole group.* They walked through the forest, sharing idle conversation about life. Crowpaw walked side by side with Ivy, staying close enough to stay warm.

"I'm so excited." Ivy purred. "I've never gotten to do anything like this."
"Me neither." Crowpaw mewed. "I mean, travelling has been fun and

exciting, but I've never seen a chicken before. I'm curious to see what they look like." He had been trying to form a picture in his head, but had been completely unable to.

"From what I remember," Ivy thought for a moment. "They're bodies are really big, but they have small heads and weird, scaly legs. They don't look like they're legs should support their bodies, but they do."
"Sounds so strange." Crowpaw laughed. "Are you sure that you didn't just imagine this?"

"I'm positive! There's all kinds of weird animals out there, like cows!"

"What's a cow?"

"It's a *huge* black and white animal the size of a monster. They have huge, hard feet that look they could crush a cat instantly."

"I think I saw some of those on my way here." Crowpaw recalled the bizarre animals. "Are they dangerous? Is there some on this farm?"

"I think so, but they're not close to the chickens."

Ivy and Crowpaw continued sharing stories of their separate travels in life. The walk was long, but having Ivy by his side made everything seem so perfect, even the long walk couldn't ruin Crowpaw's mood. Ever since he and Ivy had finally admitted their feelings, Crowpaw had known nothing but happiness. *She's given me everything I ever wanted. She's the reason I came out here. She's my home.*

"We're nearly there." Leo called as the trees began to thin out, exposing a vast field ahead of them. It almost reminded Crowpaw of the field from his dreams, but he could see trees scattered across the short grass. In the distance was a large twoleg nest. "That's the farm." Leo explained. "Once we get close, stay quiet and low. We have to make sure the twoleg won't notice us."

"Is there a dog?" Peach questioned. "Most farms I know have a dog."

"Dogs are not an issue." Flint snorted. "There's no dog that I can't outrun."

"It's true." Crowpaw chuckled. "When I first met Flint he was running from a dog for fun."

"You're insane." Omega mewed, his voice low but his expression revealed that he was rather impressed. They patrol went deeper into the field, as they got closer and closer to the farm, countless strange scents filled Crowpaw's nose. The patrol slowed down, being extra cautious as they approached the farm.

"I can smell dog, but it's very stale." Flint mewed, his voice incredibly quiet. "We're safe for now."

They neared the farm and they crept through the grass, keeping their senses on high alert. There was a few nests, one looked similar to the barn that Crowpaw had slept in when he met Sheba. The entire farm was surrounded by a thin, silver vine with thorns on it. "Be careful." Flint warned. "That stuff will hurt if you get your pelt caught on it.

They easily slipped underneath the silverthorn with only Leo leaving behind some tufts of his golden fur, but he had enough fur to spare. Once they were under the fence, Ivy motioned with her nose. "That's the chicken nest." She mewed. It was a tiny little twoleg nest with a small incline leading up to the wooden structure. Crowpaw sniffed the air, it smelled like bird but incredibly odd. "They're all inside. There's probably going to be a lot of them, I suggest we chase one or two out and separate them."

"Be safe." Leo warned. "And stay together." He looked over the ground. "Omega and Peach, you'll be with me. Flint, you'll have Crowpaw and Ivy." They all agreed and grouped together. Leo led both groups forward up the ramp. Inside the nest was dark, and the scent was foul and sharp.

Crowpaw strained his eyes to see, and he saw the chickens. They were just as Ivy had described, fat bodies with small heads. They all seemed to be sleeping, they hadn't noticed the cats yet. "This is gonna be easy." Flint sneered. He unsheathed his claws and went for one of the chickens near the floor.

As he stepped near, the wood underneath his paws creaked loudly.

The chickens woke and saw that they were under attack. The noise that followed was very strange and very loud. They started squawking and jumped from their little nests. Feathers flew off in every direction and the little nest became very crowded with chickens and cats.

The chickens hollered and jumped around, flapping their thick wings. Crowpaw felt himself getting pecked several times, it didn't bleed but it certainly hurt. "Chase them out!" Leo called. *Right!* Crowpaw bared his teeth and hissed, lashing out with his paw at the chicken nearest to him. His claws ripped through a thick layer of feathers and drew blood.

The other cats were biting and scratching at the chickens as well. The birds stumbled over each other and the cats to get to the exit. Crowpaw chased them out, exploding in a storm of feathers. The rest of his patrol had gotten out of the nest as well. Leo, Peach and Omega were chasing a chicken away from the rest of the flock.

Crowpaw spotted Ivy and Flint doing the same with another chicken. Now in the fresh-air, Crowpaw charged forward to keep up with them. Flint and Ivy flanked the chicken as it tried to run, it pecked at Flint each time he got close but Flint snapped his razor sharp teeth.

Crowpaw ran as fast as his paws would carry him, the chicken was too focused on Ivy and Flint, it didn't even know he was coming. With his claws unsheathed, Crowpaw leapt forward and landed on top of the chicken. It's skinny legs crumbled underneath the added weight of Crowpaw.

Both Crowpaw and the chicken tumbled head over tail across the farmland. The chicken was panicked, Crowpaw shot forward and sank his teeth into the bird's neck. It struggled for a few moments, kicking its legs wildly, hiding Crowpaw a few times but eventually stopped as it finally died.

"We did it!" Ivy exclaimed. She looked over to Leo and the others who were standing over their own dead chicken. "Let's get out of here!" She called to them and Leo and Omega lifted the chicken onto their backs to carry it back home.

Crowpaw felt victory rushing through his entire body. *We did it! And it was so much fun!* Crowpaw heard a creak and saw a strange light flooding through the entrance of the nearby twolegplace. It had a strange, shiny stick in its hand and was shouting in rage. "Run!" Flint called, a hint of laughter in his voice. Flint grabbed the chicken's leg in his mouth and they began running as fast as they could.

Crowpaw and Ivy ran side by side, laughing as the wind blew through their pelts. Crowpaw's heart was racing, he hadn't had this much fun in moons! A sharp sound cracked through the air, sending fear straight into Crowpaw's heart. It sounded like thunder, but much closer and louder.

"What was that?" He called to Ivy.

"I don't know!" She yelled back. "Just keep running!" They slipped underneath the silevrthorn and were nearly clear of the farm when the sharp crack sounded again. Crowpaw felt something hot splash against his pelt. *What was that?* In an instant, Ivy's body was knocked to the side by something Crowpaw couldn't see.

"Ivy!" He skidded to a stop and Crowpaw's heart stopped in his chest. Ivy's body was splayed out against the snowy field. There was a giant, bloody wound that covered almost her entire flank. Her eyes stared blankly ahead of her, void of any emotion. Crowpaw's could feel his paws freeze to the ground as his heart crumbled inside of him. *No.* "Ivy!" He yowled. "Ivy get up!"

Her blood pooled on the ground, touching Crowpaw's paws. His body trembled as he stared at Ivy's body. *A second ago she was alive, what happened to her!*

"Crowpaw!" Flint called. "Crowpaw we have to run!"

"I'm not leaving her!" Crowpaw shouted, his voice splitting from the pain in his voice. *This isn't real. This is just a dream!* He felt his body going numb, but he had to get Ivy out of here. Crowpaw heaved Ivy onto his back, she didn't move or respond in any way. *She's not dead! She can't be dead!*

Crowpaw forced himself to run, but the world around him was starting to blur. The weight of Ivy on his back slowed him down, but the fact that he refused to believe was slowing him down even more.

The path ahead of him started to fade away, it was nothing but him running in a field of darkness. *Ivy please!* He pleaded. *Don't leave me! I need you!* Only one sound broke Crowpaw's thoughts, the same sound that hurt Ivy.

A fiery pain ripped across Crowpaw's left side. He screamed out in pain and hit the ground, sending Ivy's body skidding across the field. The pain was worse than anything Crowpaw had ever felt before. The pain choked his words and his vision started to fade. "Crowpaw!" He heard Flint's voice through the fog.

Crowpaw weakly lifted his head, trying to focus on Ivy who lay in the grass a few mouselengths away from him. *Ivy.* He kept her name on his mind. *Ivy, I love you. I'm so sorry. Please...please don't leave me.* Darkness overtook him and Crowpaw slipped into a painful darkness.

Chapter 29

There was a thick mist that surrounded Crowpaw, obscuring his vision. He struggled to see through it, but there was a sweet scent on the air, the scent of his Ivy. "Ivy!" He called out for the cat he loved most. "Ivy, where are you?"

The mist began to slowly clear and Crowpaw spotted two figures in the distance. "Ivy?" He strained his eyes and saw that one of them was in fact Ivy, his heart twisted at the sight of her. Behind her was the tortoiseshell she-cat that Crowpaw had dreamed of before. "Ivy!"

Ivy's eyes flooded with sadness and love. "I'm sorry Crowpaw." She spoke, she looked away, her body shuddering. "I wish it didn't have to be this way. I'll see you soon, I love you."

"No!" Crowpaw shouted.

"Come now, Ivy, we haven't much time." The strange she-cat spoke and began guiding Ivy away from Crowpaw.

"Don't take her from me!" Crowpaw broke into a sprint them, but he never got closer. "Ivy! Ivy come back! I need you!" Pain seared through Crowpaw's body and his legs gave out from underneath him. His body hit the cold ground, snow flying up in his face.

"Crowpaw!" Crowpaw heard the familiar voice of Flint. He looked up, meeting the tom's eyes, they burned with sadness.

Pain still consumed Crowpaw's every sense. "Ivy..." He choked out her name. Flint winced.

"Come on...we're almost home." Flint lifted his muzzle underneath Crowpaw, forcing him back on his paws, he was unable to put any pressure on his left hind left. He looked at his side, the entirety of it was covered with blood. He didn't care about himself, however, he spotted Ivy's still body on Leo's back while Omega dragged a single chicken. Everyone's eyes were filled with grief and pain. *No.*

Crowpaw's body gave out again, grief accompanying the real pain. *This isn't real.* He told himself over and over. Flint helped Crowpaw to his feet once more and began leading him home, Crowpaw struggled to see through the pain, but he could see the camp in the distance.

Rudy saw them first and ran up in excitement until she saw Crowpaw's injury. Her eyes filled with horror. "No...how did this--"

"How could you let this happen?" A roar yelled out through the trees, Crowpaw met Cooper's gaze, it was filled with anger, pain and hatred. "My daughter is dead!"

"Cooper..." Leo set Ivy's body down gently. Crowpaw pulled away from Flint, dropping to the ground and dragging himself to her.

"Get away from her!" Cooper bounded across the camp and stood protectively over Ivy's body. "You did this!" Cooper's word cut Crowpaw deeply, he stared up in horror at the cat. "Get away from her!"

"Cooper, stop!' Flint shouted. "This was Ivy's idea, not his!"

"She never would have came up with it if it wasn't for him!" Cooper was hysterical, he was showing the emotions that Crowpaw felt inside, but was too hurt to show. Crowpaw forced himself to sit up.

"Cooper please...I love her...I didn't want this--"

Suddenly, Crowpaw felt himself flying across the clearing, more pain burning across his face. Crowpaw's body hit the snowy ground, he looked up in horror at Cooper. *He attacked me.* Crowpaw thought.

"Cooper!" Sabra shouted. "Don't take this out on Crowpaw!"

Cooper ignored the protests of everyone around him, the fire in his eyes was directed at Crowpaw. "Get out of here! Leave! You don't belong here! You killed my daughter!" Crowpaw couldn't pull his gaze off Cooper, his entire body shook. "Leave!" Cooper trembled with rage. "I never want to see your face again! Get out of here, Crowpaw!"

Crowpaw scrambled to his paws and ignoring the cries of his friends, and the pain in his leg he broke into a sprint. He ran through the forest as fast as he could manage. His heart pounded in his chest so much that he was certain it was going to break, if it hadn't already. Crowpaw had lost everything again.

The cat he loved, gone in the blink of an eye, and the home he had lived in for moons, the home he had fought for and hunted for, gone. Crowpaw wailed as he ran, but he didn't stop. His entire body, mind and soul ached. He didn't stop running, if he did he would only think of Ivy. He couldn't erase the image of her dead body out of his mind, or the pure hatred in Cooper's eyes.

"I'm sorry!" He wailed as loud as he could into the night sky. Crowpaw's body couldn't physically handle the pain any longer. He tripped over his paws and tumbled through an empty clearing. He had run a long ways, he was far from his home--no, he was far from the loners. Crowpaw laid on the ground, heaving and panting. He felt like he was going to be sick.

Crowpaw tilted his head back and let out a wail, all of the sadness inside of chest came rushing out like a storm. "Ivy I'm sorry!" He cried. "I'm so sorry!" Crowpaw's body shook violently, he couldn't feel anything but pain. So many faces flashed in his mind. Blacksky, Silverpool, Riverlight, Ivy, Cooper, Flint, Raindrop. So many cats he had loved, so many cats he had lost.

Crowpaw stared at the sky, wailing again. *Why does everyone around me have to die? Why can't it be me?* Crowpaw felt that this pain deep inside of him would never go away, it was the same pain that he had felt when Blacksky had died, but now it was the cat he had fallen in love with. Crowpaw had lost it all, he felt as if he had nothing left to live for. *What will I do without her?* Ivy's eyes were burned into his mind. I *wish it didn't have to be this way. I'll see you soon, I love you.* Her words rang in his mind.

Crowpaw looked up at the stars, they seemed dull and farther away than usual. "Ivy..." He whimpered. "Ivy if you can hear me...I'm so sorry. I love you so much! I can't do this without you! I need you!"

Crowpaw dropped his head once again, his body unable to move

any longer. He felt darkness slipping in once again. Crowpaw closed his eyes, giving up his fight. *Why bother fighting anymore?* He thought, the world around him starting to fade away. *Everything I have to live for is up in the stars.* Crowpaw took a deep breath. *And I'm going to join them.*

Chapter 30

Crowpaw's body felt cold, and the pain burned deep inside Crowpaw. He opened his eyes, he was in the clearing where he had collapsed. The loss of Ivy still fresh in his mind, eating at him like he was a meek piece of prey. Crowpaw looked up at the stars, they seemed brighter than normal.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Crowpaw jumped as a strange voice spoke. He looked to his side and saw the same tortoiseshell he had been dreaming of for so long now, the one that took his Ivy away.

"Who are you?" Crowpaw demanded. "Am I dead? Why did you take Ivy from me?" His voice trembled with anger.

"So many questions, Crowpaw." The she-cat's voice was soft and soothing. "No, you're not dead and Ivy had to come with me. She had died very quickly, she didn't suffer, though I'm sorry you have to."

Crowpaw dropped his head, feeling defeated. "I wish I *was* dead. I can't handle this pain anymore, I've been living it with for too long." He looked up at the she-cat, pleading. "Please, I can't do this anymore. I can't breathe."

She shook her head. "You're not meant to die, Crowpaw. I'm sorry that you had to suffer so much, it's too much for a cat to handle." Her green eyes were saddened.

Crowpaw sighed sadly and shook his head. "Why am I here then?" He questioned, staring at the sky once again. "You still haven't told me who you are yet."

"My name is Mosscloud, I used to be a MoonClan medicine cat." Crowpaw stared at her, he hadn't seen another Clan cat in so long. "You probably haven't heard of me, I lived many seasons ago."

"Why are you here? Why are you talking to me?"

"Because, Crowpaw. Many moons ago, when your father died I sent a sign to Skyclaw. I sent him a crow, a crow that had to make a very long and hard journey."

Crowpaw flattened his ears. "I only used that sign so I could run away."

"There's a reason I sent it when I did." Mosscloud mewed. "I could tell that you were in pain, and in order to heal you had to leave your home in MoonClan, you had to go on a dangerous mission that would change you forever." Crowpaw stared at his paws. "And it certainly did change you."

"Yeah," Crowpaw mewed quietly. "I lost my home again, I've lost everything."

"You haven't lost yourself, Crowpaw." Mosscloud looked at him, so much wisdom trapped in her green eyes. "And you never lost your home, MoonClan is still there, waiting for your return."

"How could I ever go back there?" Crowpaw questioned, shaking slightly. "I ran away from MoonClan, why would they ever take me back?"

"Because there's something you must do for them." Mosscloud rested her tail across her paws. "My story is a long one, but the ending is the hard part." Her eyes clouded with nostalgia. "When I was an apprentice, I was told I had a great destiny to fufill. I figured it would happen during my life, but it didn't. When I died, I was shocked to find that I was trapped outside the realm of StarClan. I couldn't talk to the cats I once knew and loved, I was cursed to walk these skies alone." Crowpaw stared in shock at the she-cat. "I won't be able to roam StarClan's fields until my destiny is fulfilled."

"What is your destiny? Is it-is it something I need to do?"

Mosscloud shook her head. "No, but there is something you have to do." She lifted her head once again. "Sickness looms over MoonClan, threatening to take the lives of many if not healed. The current medicine cats do not know what herb they will have to use, as it only grows in one spot on MoonClan territory, a spot that only *I*

know about. And as I cannot communicate with any cat from StarClan or MoonClan, I can't guide your medicine cats."

"So you need me to return to them and tell them where this herb is." Crowpaw dropped his voice. *If I don't go home, then my old Clanmates will die. If I go, then I can save them but they might not let me stay or even believe me.*

"Yes, Crowpaw. That is what I need you to do." Mosscloud nodded slowly. "The herb is called lungwort, its green with gray spots. It grows in a small cave in MoonClan territory, just beyond the training pond. This cave is where I grew most of my herbs, you'll find many more useful herbs there, but lungwort is what will save your ailing Clanmates. Return and tell them of this herb, and I'm certain you will be welcomed back as a hero."

Crowpaw shuffled his paws. "Somehow I doubt that."

"I figured you may struggle with this mission." Mosscloud sympathized. "A few moons ago, I noticed a cat trying to escape the boundaries of StarClan to follow a young traveller, I couldn't enter his realm but I could guide him to mine." Mosscloud turned to her side. "You can come out now."

Crowpaw strained his eyes, trying to see who she was talking about. Crowpaw's heart overflowed with love and joy as he saw the star speckled pelt of his father. "Blacksky!" Crowpaw shouted out in pure joy and sprinted over to his father. He pushed against him, nuzzling his father's whole body. "I missed you so much!" He cried and for a moment, Crowpaw was a kit once again, loving up against his father. The most important cat in his life.

Blacksky put a paw over Crowpaw's back, pulling him in as close as he could. "I've missed you too, son." His voice trembled, but was so caring and familiar. "I'm so sorry you've had to suffer so much, nothing has hurt more than watching you in pain. I wish I could've done more. I love you so much, my son."

"I love you too." Crowpaw buried his muzzle in Blacksky's pelt, he would never forget this moment, he would hold onto his father's presence for the rest of his days. "I don't want to leave you again,

please don't go away."

"I've never left you, Crowpaw." Blacksky said, resting his muzzle on Crowpaw's head. "I've been following you on this journey thanks to Mosscloud, I've been watching you and supporting you." Blacksky pulled back slightly, his yellow eyes brimming with pure love that seemed to heal Crowpaw's broken a heart, even just a little bit. "I'm so unbelievably proud of what you've done, Crowpaw. Never forget that, never forget how much I love you."

"I won't, father." Crowpaw's voice shook. "I promise."

"Thank you." Blacksky nuzzled Crowpaw once again until Mosscloud spoke again.

"There's one more cat that you should see, Crowpaw and it's an answer to one of the first questions you asked me."

Another cat stepped out of the shadows, this one filled Crowpaw's heart with a different kind of love. "Ivy." he breathed her name out, so sweet on his tongue. She quickly ran over to her and nuzzled her, she did the same.

"Oh, Crowpaw." Ivy breathed out, her scent the same as when she had been alive. Stars shimmered in her pelt, the sparkled deep in her beautiful green eyes. "You were right, StarClan is real."

"I knew that you wouldn't be able to continue your journey without her." Mosscloud spoke. "So I guided Ivy to StarClan, she'll return along with Blacksky when you go home. She'll be by your side forever."

Crowpaw looked at Ivy, unable to take his eyes off her. He took this time to memorize every little detail about her. "Ivy..." He breathed her name out, touching his muzzle to hers. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Crowpaw." Her eyes flooded with so many emotions, love, pain, joy and sadness. "Don't let my death break you," She mewed. "We'll meet again, I promise. I'll visit you in your dreams, I'll guide you and love you every step of the way. When it's your turn to join the stars, I'll be waiting for you."

"But I want to be with you now." Crowpaw dropped his head. "I don't want to say goodbye."

"I don't either." Ivy's voice trembled. "But we have to, you have a mission back in your home, your *true* home."
"I told you before, you're my home Ivy."

"And I'll be there with you, even if you can't see me." She touched his muzzle again. "You'll never be without me."

"As will I." Blacksky stepped in. "You're never alone, Crowpaw. We'll be with you until the very end."

Crowpaw looked from Ivy, to Blacksky, to Mosscloud. *I have a mission to do.* He thought. He held the image of the two most beloved cats in his mind. *And they'll be with me, even if I can't see them.*

"Okay." His voice broke. "I'll do it, I'll go back to MoonClan."

"Thank you, Crowpaw." Mosscloud bowed her head. "We'll guide you back home, and you'll be able to save your Clan."

Ivy touched her muzzle to Crowpaw's one last time, he breathed in her scent, making sure to never forget it. "And treat your wound you mouse-brain." Crowpaw completed forgot that he was injured. "You'll find some marigold near a small stream, it will heal your wound."

"Thank you." Crowpaw breathed out. "I love you, Ivy."

"I love you too, Crowpaw." Ivy stepped back, standing beside Blacksky.

"Go on, Crowpaw. You can do this, I know you can."

Crowpaw took a deep breath, this was really it. He would have to go home, he would have to face his past instead of running from it. Would he be able to? Would they welcome him back? In that moment he realized that it didn't really matter, he had been given a mission and he owed it to the cats that he loved to complete his mission. *I'll do it for them.* He vowed. *No matter what it takes.*

Chapter 31

Crowpaw gave his wound a tender sniff. There was no scent of infection, it still had a slight ache to it but he couldn't put off going home any longer. He had to start his journey back to MoonClan, lives were depending on his message. He had used marigold as instructed by Mosscloud to treat his wound, and now he felt ready to venture on. He had made his home in a small den outside the twolegplace.

Most nights he found hard to sleep, everytime he closed his eyes he pictured Ivy. He wanted nothing more than to hold on to her memory, and to believe that she was watching over him, but his heart longed for her. It was painful, everything he did brought intense pain to his heart. He thought about his father, about Ivy and about Cooper and the rest of the loners.

Cooper hated him, but what did the others think? He never had the chance to say goodbye to any of them, they had been his family for several moons. Crowpaw looked towards the direction of the forest. *Goodbye, friends.* He thought painfully, taking a moment to remember their faces, including Cooper's. He hoped that Starling, Firefly, FInch and Buttercup would grow up safe and healthy.

Crowpaw took a deep breath and stepped out of his den into the early morning light. He had to remember the path he took to get here, and he knew it was a long way away. He took a single paw step forward, and the only way to get home was to just keep walking.

Crowpaw walked on the outskirts of the twolegplace, he wanted to avoid running into Ripper or any of the other rogues. He knew that beyond this twolegplace was a moor, but that moor was where he had an encounter with a coyote and beyond the moor was Sheba's home. If it was nighttime by the time that Crowpaw crossed the moor, perhaps he could stay in her barn again. He didn't want to encounter the twolegs again, but he would be able to hide easily.

Crowpaw heard movement in the twolegplace, the shouts of twolegs and the barking of their dogs. He tensed and slunk lower to the ground, he really didn't want to encounter a dog at all.

He spotted the twoleg, walking with a long-haired golden dog. Crowpaw tensed and jumped to the side, slipping into a hedge and waiting patiently for them to pass. Once the twoleg and the dog vanished from his sight, he skirted along the edge of the twolegplace quickly until he neared the edge of it. He looked from side to side and darted across the thunderpath and onto the moor.

Crowpaw happily breathed in the scent of heather and rabbit. His stomach growled at the scent, he had hardly eaten the last few days and figured he should. The journey itself wasn't actually that long, but he had lingered in a few places for several days. He recalled his river den, he wondered if it was still overrun with twolegs.

Crowpaw scented and caught a rabbit for himself, he couldn't force himself to eat the entire thing, but ate until he knew he would have the strength necessary to continue. As he crossed the moor, the sun started to slowly fall. He wanted to get out of the moor before night to avoid the coyotes. He didn't want to encounter the disgusting animals again.

As the moon overtook the sky, Crowpaw could see scattered twolegnests along the horizon. *This is where Sheba's home is.* He crept in silence, hoping to avoid being seen by any other twolegs until. He kept his nose in the air, catching the light scent of cat. He followed it until he arrived to the strange, yet familiar structure of Sheba's barn. He looked around, hoping that the she-cat hadn't gone to bed already.

"Hey there, stranger!" An eager voice spoke, Crowpaw looked to his side and saw Sheba ducking out of a strange hole in the twoleg nest. "You're Crowpaw, right?"

Crowpaw nodded. "Yeah, it's nice to see you again Sheba."

"You too!" She flicked her tail and purred. "I've been telling all my friends about the cool forest cat I met, but they don't believe me. I didn't think you'd come back."

"Neither did I, but it's time for me to go home."

"It's late, you want to sleep in the barn again?"

"I'd like that." Crowpaw bowed his head. As Sheba led him towards the barn, Crowpaw couldn't help but think how much he looked like Sabra. Both she-cats had jet black fur, and long, lean bodies. In the back of his mind he recalled Sheba telling him about her sister living in the twolegplace beyond the moor. *Sabra never mentioned being a kittypet, but...*

"Hey, Sheba." Crowpaw mewed. "I remember you telling me about your sister, but you never mentioned her name."

Sheba looked over her shoulder and thought for a moment. "It's probably changed, but when I knew her it was Sabra. Why?"

Crowpaw couldn't help but purr. "Because I met your sister."

Sheba's eyes went wide. "You did? How is she?"

"She's doing great, she's not a kittypet anymore. She has a mate and kits actually. I lived with her for a few moons. She was very kind to me."

"Oh that's so good to hear!" Sheba purred loudly, her blue eyes sparkling. "What are her kits names? I'll never have kits of my own, but I'm glad she did!"

"Firefly and Starling." Crowpaw explained. "Her mate is a tom named, Flint. He was one of my good friends while I was there."

"That makes me so happy." Sheba looked towards the twolegplace. "Maybe one day I'll venture beyond my barn and find her. I've missed Sabra, she was always my best friend."

"I'm sure she'd love to see you again."

"Thank you for telling me about her, that makes me *really* happy." Crowpaw's heart felt warmed at the thought that he had made Sheba so happy. *I hope the two of them get to meet again someday.*

Sheba and Crowpaw arrived at the barn and Crowpaw breathed in the scent of hay and mice, it reminded him of the first time he stayed here. "Here we are." Sheba purred. "Get some rest and I'll see you in the morning!"

"Thank you, Sheba." Crowpaw bowed his head again and stepped into the barn, he caught a few mice to eat and made his nest in the far corner, behind some wooden structures. He didn't want to risk the twolegs seeing him. Crowpaw curled up in the soft nest and closed his eyes, wondering what his Clan would think of him.

Crowpaw woke up to the sunlight shining across his face. He lifted his head and yawned, sleeping in the barn was one of the best night sleeps he had since running away from the loners. He rose up and stretched out his limbs. After catching some breakfast, Sheba stepped into the barn.

"Good morning." Sheba purred upon seeing him. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, I did." Crowpaw approached the kittypet. "Thank you again for letting me stay here."
"Anytime." Sheba waved her tail. "If you ever come this way again, you'll always have a nest in my barn."

"Thank you."

Sheba stepped forward and nuzzled his cheek affectionately. "It's been nice to meet you Crowpaw, thank you for telling me about my sister. I hope that wherever your travels take you, you find happiness."

"Me too." Crowpaw mewed, slightly hopeful. "You have a good life, Sheba. Maybe I'll see you again someday."

Crowpaw and Sheba said their final goodbyes and Crowpaw ventured away from the barm. Crowpaw continued walking along the river, the last time he passed through it had been unbearably hot, now he had to deal with the cold. It wasn't terrible, but his paws stung from the snow beneath them.

He could see a forest in the distance, it was still a long walk away

but it made Crowpaw's stomach twist. He was getting closer and closer to MoonClan territory, this was the forest he had made his home in after running from Silverpool. He had lived in this forest for a moon, it was a nice forest, but it brought back painful memories. He wondered if twolegs would be here in the middle of leaf-bare.

When Crowpaw finally reached the forest, it was only past sunhigh so he wasn't quite ready to stop his travels for the day. The forest was huge however, it would take a long time to traverse.

Crowpaw ventured deep into the forest, despite being white this time around, Crowpaw remembered the small details. He came across the tree den he had stayed in the night before meeting Sheba. He gave it a sniff, his scent was completely gone. It only smelled of frost, Crowpaw didn't stay for too long.

He continued following the river until he arrived at the river den he had lived in for a moon, there was no sign of twolegs or their dogs. He considered stopping for the night, but Crowpaw wanted to make a little more ground. The next den he would find, would be the one he and Silverpool stayed in. Crowpaw's heart twisted at the thought of his mentor. He prayed that Silverpool wouldn't hate him when she saw him again.

Crowpaw continued on through the forest, the powerful scent of garlic filled his nose. Crowpaw came to a stop, this is where he had disguised his scent so Silverpool didn't track him. He wondered if Silverpool did continue looking for him, he just hoped that she went home. Crowpaw walked past the garlic, this part of the forest seemed longer than he remembered. *I ran this whole way last time.* Crowpaw remembered.

At long last, Crowpaw reached the end of the forest and stepped out into a vast open field. The moon was claiming the sky, he spotted the strange lights of the twolegplace and beyond that...was MoonClan territory. Crowpaw stood in place for a long time. Tomorrow he would reach home, tomorrow he would have to face the consequences of running away. *You can do it.* Crowpaw told himself. *Just keep going.*

Crowpaw needed a place to sleep, and he knew where it would be. He padded quickly through the snowy field. As the moon rose, the temperature dropped. He didn't want to get sick again. At long last, Crowpaw finally reached the abandoned den. He climbed inside where it was slightly warmer.

He curled up in the very back of the den, Silverpool filled his thoughts. He was so incredibly excited to see her but also incredibly terrified. Crowpaw closed his eyes, he thought of all the cats in MoonClan. Frostpaw and Icepaw were no doubt warriors now, and Featherdawn's kits probably were too. What would Riverlight think? She was probably glad to hear that Crowpaw was gone. Crowpaw forced all of his thoughts away, there was no use in wondering what would happen, he would just have to face his Clan when he got there.

Chapter 32

Crowpaw stepped out into the sunny morning. Snow still covered the field, but the sun was shining high above. If the weather stayed like this, it would be an easy day of travel, but he had to get going as soon as possible. Crowpaw caught a quick bite before heading towards the twolegplace.

He left the field behind, and with each step he took Crowpaw grew more and more anxious. He tried not to think about what would happen once he returned to MoonClan, he didn't want to think about getting rejected and sent away, exiled from his former home.

Crowpaw stuck to the outskirts of the twolegplace, hoping to avoid having to enter it. He could hear the thunderpath up ahead, he had gotten used to crossing them at this point. Once he crossed the thunderpath, all that awaited him was MoonClan territory. He reached the thunderpath and took a deep breath, waiting for a clear chance to pass.

Crowpaw dashed across the thunderpath, skidding to a stop at the other side. Crowpaw could already scent heather, it smelled so much of home that it made his heart ache. Crowpaw pushed forward, his heart pounding in his chest.

Crowpaw faced the large wall of silverthorn, this marked the separation between MoonClan territory and the twolegplace. On the other side was his old home. Crowpaw felt nauseous, his heart ached. *Just do it!* Crowpaw took a deep, shaky breath and glanced up at the sky. There were no stars, but he let out a silent prayer anyway. *Ivy, Blacksky, please let this be okay.*

Crowpaw located the hold in the mesh that allowed him his original passage. He slipped underneath the mesh, wincing when it dug into his pelt. *I guess I was a lot smaller when I came through here last.* Losing a few strands of his black pelt, Crowpaw made it through and his paws touched MoonClan territory for the first time in moons.

He breathed in the familiar scent, it seemed like forever since he had been here. Memories of hunting across the moor hit him like a storm. *I can't believe that I'm back here after all this time.* Crowpaw stared into the distance, MoonClan camp was out there. *And I'm going to find it.* Crowpaw took the first step deeper into MoonClan territory and the rest of his paws followed.

He crossed the moor and was overwhelmed with the urge to run. He recalled running this territory with his father, and hunting with Silverpool. *I wonder if things we'll ever go back to normal with Silverpool.*

Crowpaw knew he wasn't too far from camp, he wondered if he should wait for another cat to find him or if he should just venture into camp. As this thought crossed his mind, he heard a voice. Crowpaw tensed and ducked down slightly. The voice came from a young tom, one he didn't recognize.

"I'll be right back!" The tom yelled.

Crowpaw stiffened as a young, gray apprentice appeared over a small hill. He spotted Crowpaw and narrowed his green eyes. "I *knew* I scented something weird! Who are you? Why are you on my territory?" The apprentice demanded, puffing out his chest to look bigger.

"My name is Crowpaw." Crowpaw dipped his head.

"Crow*paw*? You seem a little old to still be an apprentice."

"I've been away for a long time. I'm a member of MoonClan, but I had to leave."

The apprentice opened his mouth but another voice spoke. "Jaypaw!" The voice belonged to a she-cat, and it was familiar but something about it seemed different. A new cat crested the hill, this one was a pure white she-cat with blue eyes. *Icepaw?* "I told you not to run off on your own! Have you--" She cut off once she spotted Crowpaw. *Is it really her?* "Crowpaw?" She stared in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

Crowpaw nodded slowly. "Yeah." He spoke quietly. "And you're...Icepaw?" He knew that wouldn't be her name anymore, but he didn't know what her warrior name was.

"Ice*storm* actually." She stared at him, as if she couldn't believe he was real. "I can't believe it's really you. Where have you been?"

"I...had somewhere to go." Crowpaw dropped his head. "But I'm back now."

"I'm really glad to see you." Icestorm padded happily up to Crowpaw, nuzzling his cheek. "Oh, Silverpool is going to be so happy to see you!" Her eyes sparkled. "Let's go home!"

Crowpaw followed Icestorm and Jaypaw, the apprentice continued to look at Crowpaw suspiciously. "So, how has MoonClan been? How's Owlstar?"

Icestorm flattened her ears. "Owlstar's dead, actually. Cloudstar is our leader now and there's a lot that happened, but now isn't the time to explain it."

"Oh," Crowpaw dropped his head, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Icestorm sighed. "He died a few moons ago to greencough."

The scent of MoonClan grew stronger and Crowpaw could hear voices. At this moment, his anxiety was raging deep inside of his chest and he felt for a moment like running and never looking back, but he knew he couldn't do that.

MoonClan camp came into view and looked just like it did when he left it behind. There were some young cats he had never seen before, and some cats he missed. *So much has changed.*

"Icestorm, you're back!" Another familiar voice spoke and Crowpaw spotted a white, spotted she-cat bound across camp. She came to a sudden stop when she saw Crowpaw. Her green eyes went wide. "I-Is that, Crowpaw?"

"Y-yeah," Crowpaw shuffled his paws.

Frostpaw sprinted over to him, nuzzling his cheek. "You're back! I'm so glad to see that you're okay!" She jumped backwards letting out a small gasp. "Oh! There's someone who needs to see you!"

"She's still as energetic as ever." Icestorm laughed. "Her name is Frostfire now, by the way." Crowpaw stared after Frostfire as she ran across camp, she had drawn the attention of several other MoonClan cats who were now staring in the direction of Crowpaw, he felt as small as a mouse.

He couldn't help but notice that Frostfire had run off towards the nursery. *Is she getting Silverpool? Does Silverpool have kits?* Frostfire vanished into the nursery and after a few moments, was dragging another cat out.

While the two of them waited for Frostfire to return, many cats' attention had been drawn by the commotion. Crowpaw spotted several familiar faces, some of which he was certain had new names. He saw Cinderpaw standing with Shadowpaw, Cinderpaw's eyes were wide while Shadowpaw's were narrow and suspicious.

"Crowpaw?" Many voices questioned and stared deep into Crowpaw's pelt.

"Honestly, Frostfire what could be so important. I have two very restless kits!" Crowpaw couldn't take his eyes off Silverpool. She was just as he remembered, his heart hurt. *She's going to hate me.* Crowpaw thought, he wanted to run but his paws were frozen to the ground.

"Just look." Frostfire motioned with her head. Silverpool turned to where Crowpaw and Icestorm were standing, all annoyance in her eyes faded away and her green eyes went wide.

"Crowpaw?" She whimpered. Crowpaw took a small step towards her. "Crowpaw!" She cried out and began sprinting across camp. Crowpaw didn't have time to brace himself before SIlverpool nearly tackled him, nuzzling him and running her tongue across his pelt. Crowpaw felt overwhelmed with love and joy.

He buried his nose into Silverpool's pelt, breathing in her familiar,

comforting scent. "Oh Crowpaw." She whimpered before finally letting him go. She looked at him, love overflowing in her eyes. "I knew you would come back, I always knew."

"I'm sorry." Crowpaw dropped his head.

Silverpool shook her head slowly. "Don't apologize, I'm just grateful that you're finally home."

Crowpaw heard a cat clear their throat and he jumped to his paws, facing Cloudstar for the first time. He felt his entire body tense as he faced the leader. *Right.* He reminded himself. *I have to talk to her.*

"So you've returned to us." Cloudstar mewed, he couldn't read her voice. She didn't sound mad, but she didn't exactly sound thrilled either.

"Yeah," Crowpaw bowed his head. "And there's something I need to tell you." He looked back up the leader. "Is...Skyclaw still around?" Crowpaw hoped that the old medicine cat was still alive.

"He's retired but yes." Cloudstar looked around the Clan, they were all staring at Crowpaw. "Follow me." Crowpaw cast a glance at Silverpool who gave him an encouraging nod. Crowpaw began slowly following the leader. Crowpaw spotted a familiar cat standing with the rest of MoonClan. The last time he had seen this cat he had been just a kit. "Badgerstripe," Cloudstar mewed. "Please go get Skyclaw."

"Yes, Cloudstar." Badgerstripe dipped his head and padded quickly off towards the elder's den. *Is Badgerstripe the medicine cat?* He recalled when they had been kits, Badgerstripe had never been too keen to fight. Crowpaw felt the burning gaze of every cat in MoonClan burning into his black pelt, but he kept his head high.

Cloudstar and Crowpaw reached the leaders den and Ivystone stepped in behind them. *She must be the deputy.* Crowpaw noted and sat down before Cloudstar and Ivystone. "What do you have to tell me?" Cloudstar questioned, giving Crowpaw a curious look. "Is it the reason you left."

"Kind of." Crowpaw shuffled his paws and a few moments later, Skyclaw stepped into the leader's den, his yellow eyes resting on Crowpaw.

"So Badgerstripe wasn't crazy, you really *have* returned." Skyclaw snorted and sat down beside Ivystone.

"Skyclaw is here," Cloudstar pointed out. "What did you need to tell me?"

Crowpaw looked to the old medicine cat, he looked relatively the same as when Crowpaw had last seen him, but there was white hidden in his gray pelt. "Do you remember before I left, I saw a crow and you saw it too?"

Skyclaw nodded. "StarClan had given me a message that one of our own was to journey beyond the borders to find something that would help our Clan. When I saw the crow, and you left, I realized it was you. When you never came back, I assumed that you had died."

Crowpaw tensed slightly. "Well," Crowpaw's throat felt incredibly dry. "I overheard you talking about that prophecy, and I used it to run away." The gazes of his old Clanmates turned slightly sharper. Crowpaw bowed his head. "I'm not going to lie, I used the sign and ran away from my problems. I didn't know if I would ever come back, but then I was visited by a StarClan cat."

"Which cat?" Skyclaw questioned curiously.

"Her name is Mosscloud, she said she used to be a MoonClan medicine cat."

"I've heard stories of Mosscloud, my mentor mentioned her once or twice. What did she tell you?" Skyclaw rested his tail over his paws, curious now.

"She told me that there was a sickness threatening MoonClan, and the only place to find the necessary herb was in a hidden herb garden she had when she was alive." Crowpaw wasn't sure if there even *was* sickness in MoonClan right now, if there wasn't they might

think he was crazy.

"There *is* a strange sickness going around." Skyclaw confirmed after sharing a glance with Cloudstar and Ivystone. "It took the life of Snowpaw, we are unsure of what it is or how to cure. Badgerstripe and I have tried everything, even the other medicine cats have no idea how to cure it. Right now, Lightningpaw, Spidertail and Longwhisker are sick with the same illness. We've been fearing the worst." Skyclaw looked to Cloudstar. "If Crowpaw is right about this herb, it could save their lives."

"What herb is it?" Cloudstar questioned.

"It's called lungwort."

Before Skyclaw could respond, Crowpaw heard the sound of rushed pawsteps. A small black tom poked his head into the den, he had yellow eyes that were wide with fear. "Skyclaw! Badgerstripe needs you! Now!"

Without hesitation, Skyclaw jumped to his paws and ran out of the leader's den. Crowpaw didn't stop to think, he just followed the medicine cat out and into the camp. He could hear Cloudstar and Ivystone behind him, and they stopped to watch. The apprentice ran into the medicine cat den with Skyclaw behind him.

Crowpaw spotted Snakepelt standing outside of the den, horror filling his eyes. After a few grueling moments, Skyclaw stepped outside. His eyes weren't filled with grief, but they were deeply frightened. "How is Lightningpaw?" Snakepelt questioned, his voice shaking.

"She's alive, but she doesn't have much time left." Snakepelt's eyes went wide with terror. *Snakepelt must be her father.* Crowpaw noted.

Skyclaw quickly padded up to Crowpaw. "If that herb is out there, we need to get it *now*."

"What herb?" Snakepelt stepped in, looking at Crowpaw curiously.

"While Crowpaw was out, he was told of an herb that could cure our sickness." Skyclaw explained.

Crowpaw met Snakepelt's pained gaze. "Please, Crowpaw. Go get this herb, I can't lose anyone else." Crowpaw could feel the pain in Snakepelt's gaze, he had felt the same kind of pain.

"I'll do what I can." Crowpaw promised.

"We need to leave now." Skyclaw demanded. "Lead the way Crowpaw."

Crowpaw nodded quickly and ran out the back of camp, his paws carrying him gracefully across the moor. He hadn't been in MoonClan in so long, and yet he still knew everything about his home. Behind him, Skyclaw and Cloudstar ran after him. *I have to hurry.* Crowpaw thought and recalled what Mosscloud had told him about the herb. *Her garden is just past the training pool.*

They reached the training pool quickly and Crowpaw began searching for the garden. "It's around here somewhere." Crowpaw called.

"How could it be? Someone would have seen it by now." Cloudstar questioned. Crowpaw didn't answer her, he was too focused. *I know it's here!* Crowpaw told himself, Mosscloud wouldn't lie to him like that. He frantically searched the moor until he spotted a cluster of brambles.

Crowpaw trotted up to them and could see the small entrance to a cave underneath the twisting brambles. Crowpaw instantly began ripping at the brambles with his claws. The thorns sliced at his pads, but he ignored it. *I have to save Lightningpaw. I can't let her die.* Crowpaw had never met this apprentice, but he felt a strong sense of duty towards his Clan. *Everything I've done has led up to this.*

"What are you doing?" Skyclaw questioned, walking up to Crowpaw.

Crowpaw didn't respond, he took a bramble in his jaws and ripped it away. He could taste blood as the thorns pricked his tongue, but once again he ignored it. At long last, Crowpaw had finally cleared a way into the cave. He pushed his body through the entrance and found himself surrounded by thick herbs, overgrown and lush.

"Oh my..." Skyclaw breathed out as he stepped into the den. "There's so many herbs down here!"

"The one we're looking for has gray spots on it." Crowpaw explained and began tearing through the other herbs to find it.

"I found it!" Cloudstar announced from where she had been searching. Crowpaw and Skyclaw joined her side and looked at the large supply of the herb. It looked exactly as Mosscloud had described it.

"Grab as much as you can." Skyclaw ordered and all three cats picked up large bundles of the lungwort in their jaws. They climbed out of the den and began the run back to MoonClan camp. *Please let this work.* Crowpaw prayed silently.

They arrived back at camp and Crowpaw followed Cloudstar and Skyclaw into the medicine cat den. "What's this?" Badgerstripe questioned, looking up from a small white she-cat. Judging by her size and lifeless figure, Crowpaw assumed that it was Lightningpaw.

"It's lungwort." Skyclaw set the herb down. "An old MoonClan medicine cat told Crowpaw about it. It's supposed to cure this illness." Badgerstripe seemed skeptical but Skyclaw was getting impatient. "We don't have time to question it." Skyclaw urged. "Lightningpaw is running out of time."

Without waiting for Badgerstripe's word, Skyclaw began force feeding the herb to Lightningpaw. The she-cat didn't move, but she managed to eat the herb. Badgerstripe sighed. "Ravenpaw, give the herb to Longwhisker." The small black apprentice nodded and picked up a leaf, giving it to the black and white tom while Badgerstripe gave the lungwort to Spidertail.

"Now we wait." Skyclaw sighed and turned to Crowpaw. "Are you sure this will work."

"That's what Mosscloud told me."

"They need rest." Badgerstripe spoke up. "We should give them quiet." Crowpaw dipped his head and he, Skyclaw and Cloudstar

left the den where Snakepelt was waiting outside.

"So? Did it work?"

"No herb is instant." Skyclaw mewed. "But if it does work, I'm sure we'll know by tomorrow."

Cloudstar looked at Crowpaw, he looked over to meet her gaze. "Crowpaw, if this works then all of MoonClan will be incredibly grateful." Crowpaw wasn't sure what to say.

"So what do I do now?" Crowpaw questioned. He didn't feel like he was a member of MoonClan right now, he felt like an outsider.

"Tonight you can sleep in the apprentice den, given your name and all, and tomorrow we'll see how Lightningpaw is doing, then I'll decide what I want to do about you." Cloudstar gave a nod. "Welcome home, Crowpaw."

Chapter 33

"Crowpaw. Crowpaw wake up!" A voice interrupted Crowpaw's slumber, he lifted his head and blinked his groggy eyes. A young face was just in front of his with bright yellow eyes. It was the young medicine cat apprentice, Ravenpaw.

"What is it?" Crowpaw questioned with a yawn. "Bagderstripe and Skyclaw want to speak to you."

Crowpaw looked around, the apprentice den was now empty after being nearly full last night. He felt strange sleeping in a den filled with young cats, and MoonClan had many apprentices. *I'm glad to see MoonClan is thriving despite the sickness.* Crowpaw rose from his nest and stretched out for a moment before following Ravenpaw back into the camp where he was led to the medicine cat den.

Crowpaw poked his head inside, hoping to see that Lightningpaw was awake but he saw much more. The she-cat was not only awake, but slowly nibbling at a fish. Her pale yellow eyes were bright and full of life. Longwhisker and Spidertail were also full of life, talking and laughing. Badgerstripe looked up from his herbs as Crowpaw stepped in.

"Good morning." He chirped happily. "The lungwort worked perfectly! I believe that Lightningpaw is going to make a full recovery."

"That's great to hear." Crowpaw purred. Lightningpaw looked up from her fish at Crowpaw.

"So you're Crowpaw?" She questioned. Crowpaw nodded. "Thank you for coming back and bringing me that herb, I feel a lot better."

"Of course, Lightningpaw. I'm glad I got a chance to meet you." Crowpaw bowed his head for the young apprentice.

"Is it true?" Crowpaw heard the frantic voice of Snakepelt from

outside the den, he ran inside and looked at his daughter. Eyes filling with love and relief. "Oh, Lightningpaw!" Crowpaw jumped out of the way as Snakepelt dashed across the medicine cat to Lightningpaw's side and nuzzled his daughter. "Oh thank the stars, I'm so glad you're okay!"

Snakepelt stood up after a moment and turned to face Crowpaw. "I'm thanking the stars, but I should be thanking you. Without you Lightningpaw would have died, so thank you. Thank you for saving my daughter. I've already lost Whiteriver and Snowpaw, I don't know if I could handle losing Lightningpaw as well."

What happened to Whiteriver? Crowpaw wondered, but didn't ask. He would find out later. "Lightningpaw may be recovering," Badgerstripe spoke up. "But she still needs some rest. Go on, now. Let her sleep."

Snakepelt reluctantly left the den and Crowpaw and Skyclaw followed him. "Thank you for helping as well, brother." Snakepelt bowed his head to Skyclaw.

"Even in retirement, my heart will always be in the medicine cat den." Skyclaw replied. "I'm always happy to help kin." Snakepelt padded off and went to tell the Clan about Lightningpaw's recovery.

"What is going to happen now?" Crowpaw questioned Skyclaw.

"That's up to Cloudstar." Skyclaw mewed. "I'll go and tell her that the herb worked, I'm sure she already has an idea of what to do with you."

Crowpaw wasn't quite sure of what Skyclaw meant, but he spotted Frostfire and Icestorm trotting up to him. "We heard about Lightningpaw." Frostfire purred loudly. "I'm so happy that she's okay! And it's all thanks to you!"

"Yeah," Crowpaw shuffled his paws awkwardly, he wasn't really sure he should take credit. He told the Clan about the herb, but he had still ran away. He left the Clan for moons, would saving Lightningpaw make them forget about that?

"Don't look so down." Icestorm rested her tail on Crowpaw's shoulders. "You seem so nervous."

"I just don't know what the Clan thinks of me." Crowpaw admitted. "I left for so long, and I didn't leave to get the herb. I ran away from my problems and it was only when Mosscloud visited me that I decided to actually come back."

"It doesn't matter what the Clan thinks of you." Frostfire assured him. "It matters what you think, and what the cats who care about you think. Both of us are *so* happy to see you again, and so is Silverpool. She was so crushed when you left, you saw the look in her eyes, she loves you Crowpaw and she'll fight to keep you here." Crowpaw glanced towards the nursery where he assumed that Silverpool was sleeping. He had been so happy to see her as well, it was Silverpool who kept his mind clear, even when he was gone. "I just hope Cloudstar lets me stay."

"She *has* to." Frostfire argued. "You saved Lightningpaw!"

"Speaking of..." Icestorm was looking over her shoulder towards the leaders den where Cloudstar was stepping out and moving towards the gathering area for the Clan. "Looks like she's going to call a meeting."

"About Crowpaw?" Frostfire wondered.

"Probably."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Cloudstar's voice rang out and Crowpaw skittishly followed Icestorm and Frostfire over to where the Clan was gathering.

"What's this about?" Crowpaw heard a soft voice behind him as Silverpool approached, she sat down beside Crowpaw.

"Dunno." Crowpaw shrugged. "Me, maybe."

A gaunt figure with shallow eyes caught Crowpaw's attention. He turned his head and saw Riverlight lurking near the elder's den. *She retired?* Crowpaw caught his mother's gaze and could barely

stomach the look she gave him. Crowpaw hastily turned away and focused on Cloudstar as the leader began to speak.

"Many of you know who Crowpaw is," Cloudstar mewed. "Some of our younger apprentices don't, however. Crowpaw left the Clan many, many moons, back when Owlstar was still leader. We didn't know if he would return, or if he was even alive but Crowpaw returned to us at long last and brought news of an herb. This herb saved the life of Lightningpaw who is now recovering from the illness that claimed the life of her sister." Crowpaw could feel every single pair of eyes tearing into his pelt, he tensed up and just kept staring at Cloudstar.

"Are you going to welcome him back into the Clan?" An irritated voice spoke up, it came from a familiar black tom. When Crowpaw knew him his name was Shadowpaw, but he assumed that wasn't the case anymore. "He abandoned the Clan to run away from his problems, how can we be sure he won't do that again? He's a coward."

Crowpaw ducked his head, feeling his words cut deeper than claws ever could. "Crowpaw may have left, Shadowpelt," It was Silverpool who spoke up, her voice defensive. "But he came back *and* not only did he save Lightningpaw's life by providing that herb, but know that we know where this herb garden is we have so many more herbs! Whatever reasons Crowpaw had for leaving are his own, but the fact of the matter is he *saved* a life, possibly many more. Who knows how that sickness could have spread."

Shadowpelt lashed his tail. "Of course *you* would defend him." He snarled. "You spent countless moons weeping over his loss."

"Because I care about him!" Silverpool snapped.

"That's enough you two." Cloudstar raised her voice.

"Silverpool is right." Frostfire chimed in. "Crowpaw deserves a place in the Clan!"

"I agree!" Icestorm stood up.

"Because of Crowpaw my daughter is alive." Snakepelt spoke up. "Had he not come back at all, she wouldn't be here right now."

"It's clear that most of the Clan agrees." Cloudstar looked over her warriors. Crowpaw could see approving gazes from the cats of MoonClan, the only one that seemed annoyed with Shadowpelt. Crowpaw looked over at the elder's den, but Riverlight had vanished inside. "And I had already made the decision myself." Cloudstar stood up. "Crowpaw, please step forward."

Crowpaw stared in stunned silence at the leader. *Is this really happening?* Silverpool gave Crowpaw a gentle nudge forward. Taking a deep breath, Crowpaw stepped through the crowd and faced Cloudstar.

"Crowpaw, you've been gone for a long time. You've seen many things that no one in this camp could dream of, faced experiences and challenges that you could teach all of us. You were made an apprentice many moons ago by Owlstar, so I am proud to make you a warrior after all this time." *It really is happening.* Crowpaw couldn't stop his body from shaking. "Crowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Crowpaw had to put all of his heart into those two small words, he needed to convince not only the entire Clan, but himself, that he meant this vow.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Crowpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Crowsky, in honor of your father, who watches over you from the stars. MoonClan honors your resilience and courage and I finally welcome you as a full warrior of MoonClan." Crowsky felt his new name buzzing in his veins. *Named after my father, I wouldn't want it any other way.*

Crowsky stepped forward as Cloudstar rested her muzzle on his forehead and he gave her shoulder a small lick. "Thank you, Cloudstar." Crowsky mewed quietly.

"It is an honor, Crowsky."

"Crowsky! Crowsky! Crowsky!" MoonClan cheered his name and for the first time in countless moons, he felt like he was at home.

"Oh I've dreamed of this day for so many moons." Silverpool purred, nuzzling Crowsky's cheek. "I just know that Blacksky is so proud of you."

"Thank you, Silverpool." Crowsky could barely contain the emotion in his voice. "I hope so."

"I'm proud of you as well." Silverpool touched her muzzle to his.

"You're finally a warrior!" Icestorm nudged him.

"I told you that we would become warriors before you!" Frostfire teased. "You should tell us some stories about what you saw out there, I'm sure it was crazy."

"Later," Silverpool rested her tail on Frostfire's pelt. "He has to prepare for his vigil, and I have to go save Driftwater from our kits." They glanced towards the nursery where Silverpool's two kits, Tawnykit and Smallkit, were jumping all over their father.

Crowsky hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time with the two kits, but they were close to being apprentices. Tawnykit was a pretty tortoiseshell she-cat and Smallkit was a very small dark gray tabby tom. Crowsky wanted to get to know her kits much better, they were Silverpool's kits and he wanted them to be like siblings to them.

"Enjoy your vigil." Silverpool touched her muzzle to Crowsky's and quickly trotted over to Driftwafter, after he was saved, Crowsky noticed that he was padding over to him.

"Congratulations, Crowsky." He dipped his head.

Crowsky blinked, he hadn't been expecting a personal congratulations from Driftwafter. "Thank you."

"I know how much Silverpool cares about you," Driftwafter explained. "So that's why when I became her mate, I promised her that I would show you the same amount of care. I'm not trying to

replace your father or anything, I just want you to know that you can always count on me."

Crowsky felt genuinely warmed by Driftwater's sentiment. "Thank you, that means a lot." Crowsky bowed his head. "I'm really glad that Silverpool was able to find happiness in you."

"We found happiness in each other." Driftwater purred. "I'm glad you're back, I can see it in her eyes, Silverpool is finally complete. I've given her love and kits, but I always knew a part of her left when you did, and now you're back."

Crowsky looked over at Silverpool who showed her two kits a hunting crouch, their eyes shimmering with joy. *I'm so glad I came back, for her sake.*

Chapter 34

"I'm so excited!" Smallkit squealed running in circles around Crowsky, Driftwater and Silverpool. "We're finally going to be apprentices!"

"Not if you don't smooth down your pelt!" Silverpool pulled in son in closer, rasping her tongue across his spiky pelt. "Behave yourself, Smallkit."

"But I can hardly contain myself!" Smallkit broke away from his mother, turning in circles. "I'm going to be an *apprentice*! Who is my mentor going to be? I hope it's you Crowsky!"

Crowsky couldn't help but purr. "I doubt that, I've only been a warrior for a moon. There's plenty more warriors worthy of being your mentor."

"Well, whoever it is," Smallkit flicked his tail. "I want them to be awesome!"

"You'll respect your mentor whoever it is." Driftwater chimed in.

"I know, I know." Smallkit snorted then turned to his much calmer sister, Tawnykit. "Aren't you excited?"

"Of course I am." Tawnykit purred. "But apprentices have to be serious and proper." Smallkit rolled his eyes playfully.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Cloudstar's voice rang out across the camp.

"It's time!" Smallkit jumped to his paws, ready to sprint towards the gathering area until Driftwater caught his tail and pulled him back.

"You'll *walk* there like a respectful apprentice, not like it's your first day out in the camp!" Driftwater scolded. Smallkit flattened his ears, but his spirit still shone brightly in his blue eyes. Crowsky followed Driftwater, Silverpool and their kits to the gathering area where they sat before Cloudstar.

"Today is a proud day for MoonClan, Tawnykit and Smallkit have reached the age of six moons are are ready to start their paws on the path of a warrior. With them in our den, we will show that MoonClan is as strong as ever." Smallkit could barely sit still, Crowsky purred with amusement. "Tawnykit and Smallkit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior names you will be known as Tawnypaw and Smallpaw. Tawnypaw, your mentor will be Nightfeather, she is kind, yet fierce. These are powerful traits that I trust she will pass on to you."

Tawnypaw and Nightfeather touched muzzles and stepped to the side. *When I left, Nightfeather was a kit and now she's got an apprentice.* Crowsky recalled. "And Smallpaw, your mentor will be Squirrelpelt. She's strong and brave, I know she will guide you to become a brave warrior."

"Smallpaw! Tawnypaw!" MoonClan cheered their newest apprentices and Smallpaw and Tawnypaw quickly started pestering their new mentors. Crowsky couldn't help but notice Shadowpelt sulking at the back of camp. *Is it mad he didn't get an apprentice?* Crowsky didn't remember him being such a sour cat, he wondered what happened.

"Are you ready for your first gathering back?" Frostfire's mew pulled Crowsky's attention away from his Clanmate.

"Terrified actually." Crowsky admitted, shuffling his paws. He wasn't sure he was ready to face the Clans. What would they think of him? Would Crowsky be able to face Elmheart?

"It'll be fine." Silverpool nudged him after seeing her kits off into the forest for the first time. "We'll be with you."

"Yeah," Crowsky mewed awkwardly.

"Walk with me." Silverpool nudged Crowsky to his paws and guided him just out of camp. "I know what you're fearing." Crowsky didn't respond he just stared at his paws. "You're afraid of seeing Elmheart."

"I just--don't know how to face him." Crowsky admitted.

"There's something you don't know, Crowsky." Silverpool sighed. "Owlstar started a war with LichenClan over the death of Blacksky not long after you left." Crowsky's eyes went wide. *A war?* "Cloudstar continued the fight after Owlstar died and it cost us the lives of several warriors. I never once partook in the fighting, I know it's not what you or your father would have wanted."

"Who died?"

"Whiteriver and Windsong, and Cloudstar lost a life." Silverpool looked up. "We killed LichenClan cats too, those who didn't have anything to do with this. It was actually Elmheart who stopped it. He has a family now, he convinced Cloudstar to stop." Silverpool met Crowsky's troubled gaze. "I don't expect *you* to forgive him, I know that part of me never will, but he did stop more deaths from happening."

"I suppose." Crowsky shuffled his paws awkwardly. Last time he had seen Elmheart, he was violent apprentice who killed his father. It didn't matter that he had a family now, he was still the cat who ruined Crowsky's. *I don't want revenge* Crowsky told himself. *But I will* never *forgive Elmheart for what he did.*

"Crowsky!" Crowsky heard small, eager voices calling for him. He looked towards the nursery and saw five kits racing towards him. It was Ashbird's kits, Ebonykit and Shadekit, and Dovestorm's kits, Mistkit, Ravenkit, Ashkit and Stormkit. While Crowsky had been getting to know Smallpaw and Tawnypaw he had also spent some time with the other kits in the nursery.

"What do you need kits?" Crowsky questioned kindly.

"You promised us you would tell us stories!" Ebonykit proclaimed.

"I don't know how much time I'll have before the gathering." Crowsky admitted, casting a glance up towards the sky. The sun was slowly falling behind the clouds, they would have to leave soon.

"Just *one little* story please!" Shadekit begged.

Crowsky thought for a moment, he knew the perfect story. "Alright, alright." Crowsky turned to face the kits. "Let me ask you kits something, have you ever heard of a coyote?"

Their eyes went wide. "What's a coy--o--tee?" Ashkit struggled to pronounce the words. "What is that?"

"They're similar to dogs and foxes, but they're *much* bigger. They have deadly teeth and lifeless eyes. They reek of crowfood and eat anything that crosses their path." The kits huddled together, their eyes wide with excitement. "When I was travelling, it started to rain so I took shelter in a cave. When I woke up I found myself face to face with a coyote pup." The kits gasped. "The pup wasn't a problem, but then it's mother showed up. It chased me all the way across the moor I was on. I was *terrified*, but as you know MoonClan cats are the fastest animals around, but that coyote was nipping at my tail. I finally got up a tree, away from it."

"What happened to the coyote?" Stormkit questioned.

"It clawed at the base of the tree, trying to get me, but like dogs they can't climb trees. I stayed up in that tree for a very long time until I was sure the coast was clear."

"That's so cool!" Ebonykit gushed. "You must be *so fast*. I want you to be my mentor, Crowsky!"

"No, I want him to be my mentor!" Shadekit pushed her sister lightly. "Imagine all the stuff he could teach us!"

"Kits!" An irritated mew called from the nursery. Nightfeather stood outside the nursery with anger in her eyes. "Stop pestering Crowsky and Silverpool, they have a gathering to get to."

"But he was telling us stories!" Ebonykit argued.

"Get back in your nests, it's time to settle down for the night."

The kits shared a collective groan but looked towards Crowsky. "Thank you for the story! Will you tell us more tomorrow?"

"Absolutely." Crowsky promised and watched as the large group of

kits ran to the nursery.

"You've become quite the popular cat among the kits." Silverpool nudged him.

"They only like me for my stories." Crowsky laughed.

"No one else has stories like you." Silverpool turned towards the entrance to camp where several cats were starting to gather. "Looks like it's time to go."

"Yeah," Crowsky took a deep breath and followed Silverpool to the head of camp where MoonClan was gathering. Crowsky was relieved that Icestorm and Frostfire were attending along with him and Silverpool. Driftwater was also coming, but their kits would be staying behind.

Crowsky noticed the hate-filled gaze of Shadowpelt sulking with Cinderfur and Hawkface. Crowsky still didn't know why Shadowpelt hated him, the two of them never really interacted when he was an apprentice, did his leaving really upset Shadowpelt that much?

"MoonClan!" Cloudstar raised her voice. "Let's head out." With Cloudstar at the lead, Crowsky followed his Clanmates, walking in between Icestorm and Silverpool towards the gathering hollow. He wondered how the other Clans had changed, he had learned that Birdstar had died and the Clan was now led by Jumpstar with Daisyfern as his deputy.

MoonClan arrived just after AshClan did and Crowsky noticed that LichenClan was already in the hollow. His eyes scanned the crowd, there were some cats he knew and some he didn't. He couldn't see Elmheart or Jaggedtail just yet, he wouldn't mind seeing Jaggedtail, but he hoped to stay away from Elmheart.

As MoonClan reached the hollow, he noticed Cedarclaw breaking away from the group in a hurry, heading towards the group of AshClan cats. *What's that about?* He wondered, flicking his tail, but he didn't spend too much time thinking about it. Crowsky looked over the leaders, he could see Jumpstar dipping his head to Cloudstar as she approached, he could also see that Goldenstar still

led AshClan. Not long after, Foxstar arrived with SunClan behind him.

The Clans gathered and faced the four trees, it was Cloudstar who started the night off. "MoonClan is proud to welcome one of our cats back after being missing for a few moons and he has earned his warrior name, Crowsky!"

So many confused gazes burned into Crowsky's pelt, he ducked his head and shuffled his paws, feeling awkward. *She said I was missing. That's not the truth.* He slowly swayed his tail. "We also welcome two new apprentices, Tawnypaw and Smallpaw!" Crowsky was glad that the attention was of of him and focused on the two new apprentices.

Cloudstar sat down and Foxstar stood up in her place. "Prey is running exceptionally well this season," The ginger leader began. "And we welcome two new kits in the nursery as well as new apprentice, please welcome Willowpaw!

Goldenstar stood up once Foxstar was finished. "AshClan also welcomes new kits, Batkit, Crowkit, Nightkit and Dustkit!"

The final announcement came from Jumpstar "LichenClan is thriving, we have plenty of prey but not much news to announce."

The news came to an end and the night wasn't too incredibly cold, so the Clans decided to mingle. Crowsky wasn't sure who he should talk to, he just kind of kept close to Silverpool like a scared apprentice.

However, he noticed a familiar dark brown pelt approaching him, it was Jaggedtail. "You're back." He breathed out in amazement. "I was wondering what had happened to you, where did you go?"

"It's a...long story." Crowsky brushed the question away. "It's nice to see you again, Jaggedtail."

"You as well." Jaggedtail bowed his head. "Nice name by the way."

"Thank you. How have things been in LichenClan."

"Better lately." Jaggedtail mewed, he seemed awkward as well. Was it because he left? Because Jaggedtail's best friend killed his father? Or was it because MoonClan and LichenClan had apparently fought a war while he had been gone. A ginger and cream tabby she-cat padded up to Jaggedtail, looking at Jaggedtail with a certain fondness in her eyes.

"Who is this?" She questioned kindly, her voice soft.

"This is Crowsky." Jaggedtail explained. "I met him a while ago, but I guess he had to leave MoonClan for a while. Crowsky this is Cherrypool."

"It's nice to meet you." Crowsky dipped his head respectfully.

As Crowsky spoke to the two LichenClan cats, small flakes began to fall from the sky. "MoonClan!" Cloudstar's voice rang out above the crowd. "We should get going before we get caught in the snow."

"Guess I'm going then." Crowsky mewed. "It was nice to see you again, Jaggedtail and it was nice to meet you Cherrypool."

"You as well." Jaggedtail and Cherrypool watched Crowsky leave with Silverpool at his side. Slowly things were falling back into a sense of normalcy, but everything still felt strange. *I hope that one day I'll be able to find my paws in this forest again.*

Chapter 35

Crowsky could feel the wind pulling through his fur as he raced across the moor, his paws thrummed against the grass and the world blurred past him. He had been longing to get his paws out on the moor, the scent of rabbit and heather filling his nose. Crowsky could see his target in the distance, the early sunlight reflecting off the river's surface. *I'm going to win.* Crowsky thought triumphantly.

At long last he reached the river that separated MoonClan territory from the Spirit Woods. He came to a stop, barely needing a moment to catch his breath. Behind him came Icestorm and not long after was Frostfire. "I told you I'd win." Crowsky bragged, waving his tail.

"I haven't gotten a good run like that in moons!" Frostfire stretched out her limbs. "Training an apprentice takes up so much time."

"It was a lot of fun though." Icestorm chimed in.

Frostfire nodded in agreement. The night before, Feathercloud, Jayclaw and Smudgenose had all been named warriors, leaving Frostfire and Icestorm without apprentices. The three of them agreed to have a race through the forest like old times. Crowsky had forgotten how much he missed the two sisters.

"We *should* get some hunting done while we're out here, though." Icestorm suggested. "Ivystone might have our ears if she finds out we've been racing like apprentices."

"It'll be easy to catch some prey." Frostfire mewed. "The rabbits are practically jumping into our paws lately."

"Then let's get to it." Icestorm began padding off. "I'm going to hunt near the LichenClan border, there's a new nest over there!"

Icestorm vanished across the moor, leaving Crowsky and Frostfire alone. "Do you think that Cloudstar will make you the mentor of Shadekit or Ebonykit? They should be having their ceremony any

day now."

"I don't know." Crowsky admitted. "I still don't know if I'm ready. I might be older than you, but I've only been a warrior for three moons."

"Yeah, but you learned so much out there." Frostfire encouraged. "You still haven't said everything that happened to you out there." She complained. "Like this scar." She brushed her tail across his flank, phantom pain spread throughout his entire body.

"That scar doesn't have a happy ending." Crowsky dropped his head, picturing Ivy's dead body once again. He had been reluctant to talk about his time with the loners, he missed them and most of all he missed Ivy. Talking about it made his heart ache.

"What happened?" He figured that Frostfire wouldn't drop it, he sighed.

"I spent some time living with a group of loners." He began. "One of them was a she-cat named Ivy.. When leaf-bare came, there was hardly any prey in the forest so she came up with an idea to go to a special twoleg area called a farm and hunt these big birds called chickens. We killed two of them and started to make a run for it. There was this super loud sound, it almost sounded like thunder and out of nowhere--" Crowsky's voice choked up. "Ivy was dead, she had a huge wound that came out of thin air. I stopped to try and help her, but I heard the sound again and felt a horrible pain in my leg." He looked to his faint scar. "I passed out and when I woke up I was back in our camp. Cooper, Ivy's father, blamed me for her death and told me to leave. I ran out into the snow and collapsed. That's when Mosscloud visited me."

"You loved her, didn't you?"

Crowsky winced. "Yes."

"I'm sorry that happened to you." Frostfire's voice was low and sad. "I know I'm not Ivy, but I'll always be here for you." Crowsky was shocked as Frostfire nuzzled up against Crowsky. "I'm glad you came back."

Crowsky felt his pelt burn. *What is happening?* "Th-thank you." He stammered. Frostfire stepped back, shuffling her paws awkwardly.

"We-we should get some prey."

Crowsky nervously agreed and the two of them set out hunting and Crowsky dropped the whole situation, just trying to focus on their hunt.

Together Crowsky, Frostfire and Icestorm managed to catch four rabbits and brought them back to camp. "Welcome back." Ivystone greeted them "Nice catch." She praised quickly before setting her eyes on Crowsky. "Cloudstar wants to talk to you." Excitement flashed in both Icestorm and Frostfire's eyes, but he wasn't sure why.

"Alright." Crowsky set his rabbits down on the fresh-kill pile and followed the Clan deputy to Cloudstar's den. Inside was the leader along with Stonefoot, they sat patiently.

"Thank you for coming." Cloudstar dipped her head. "Have a seat, Crowsky."

Crowsky sat down beside Stonefoot as Ivystone sat with Cloudstar. "What's this about?"

"Ebonykit and Shadekit have reached the age of six moons and I want you and Stonefoot to mentor them. You will be made Ebonykit's mentor."

Crowsky's eyes went wide. *She's really trusting me to mentor Ebonykit?* Crowsky bowed his head. "Th-thank you so much, Cloudstar. I'm honored."

Cloudstar purred. "Ebonykit has been pretty adamant that you be her mentor, and Ashbird agreed that you would be a good choice."

Crowsky felt excitement burning in his paws. *I get to mentor an apprentice.* Moons ago he never thought he would even earn his warrior name. *This is my chance to prove myself to the Clan.*

"If all is agreed," Cloudstar stood up. "Let's hold the ceremony!" The

four cats left the den and Cloudstar raised her voice to gather the Clan. MoonClan quickly began to gather and Crowsky saw Ashbird struggling to keep Shadekit and Ebonykit calm. Crowsky purred with amusement, he was so excited to start training Ebonykit.

Once Ebonykit and Shadekit arrived, Cloudstar began. "Today is a proud day for MoonClan, by naming apprentices we show that we will remain strong for many moons to come. Ebonykit and Shadekit, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior names you will be known as Ebonypaw and Shadepaw. Ebonypaw, your mentor will be Crowsky. He learned a lot during his time away from the Clan, and I know that you will benefit greatly from his wisdom."

Crowsky eagerly stepped forward and touched his nose to Ebonypaw's. Together, they quickly padded off to the side so that the ceremony could continue. "Shadepaw, your mentor will be Stonefoot. One of my most noble and strongest warriors, he will train you well."

"Ebonypaw! Shadepaw! Ebonypaw! Shadepaw!" The Clan cheered their newest apprentices and Ebonypaw began hopping around in front of Crowsky.

"What are we going to do first?" She questioned, her yellow eyes wide and eager.

Crowsky thought for a moment, and before he could answer he was approached by Silverpool. "Congratulations to both of you." She purred.

"Thanks!" Ebonypaw cheered. "I'm so excited to get started!"

"I think we'll go fishing first." Crowsky decided.

"Fun!" Ebonypaw seemed incredibly eager to get started so Crowsky knew he couldn't keep her waiting. "I'll talk to you later." He bid farewell to Silverpool and started guiding Ebonypaw out of camp. He knew that as a mentor he would be spending a lot of time training, and he was okay with that.

"Where are we going fishing?"

"The SunClan border." Crowsky replied. "It's an easy place to catch fish." While they walked across the moor, Ebonypaw looked across MoonClan territory with pure amazement in her eyes.

"Our territory is so *big!*"

"Our territory doesn't even compare to what's beyond the borders." Crowsky mewed. "There's so much out there, no cat could ever see all of it in a single life time."

"Will I ever get to leave the territory?" Ebonypaw questioned.

"I don't know." Crowsky admitted. "Perhaps one day, but it's not an easy life out there. I lived a lot of my time there alone, no one to hunt with or sleep beside. It's not a life I recommend."

"But you did make friends right? You mentioned that you lived with a group of loners." Crowsky winced slightly.

"Yes, but I'm not a loner. I'm a Clan cat, I couldn't live with them anymore." *No matter how badly I cared about them.* He wondered how they were doing, Starling and Firefly would be old enough to be hunting by now. *I hope they're doing well.*

Crowsky and Ebonypaw reached the river and Crowsky was finally able to get his mind off the loners. "When you're fishing there's a few things that you need to be sure of." He began. "When you set on the bank, make sure that your shadow isn't across the water or it will scare the fish away." Crowsky demonstrated by making sure his shadow cast away from the river, Ebonypaw copied him. "The key to catching a fish is speed, you need to be fast *and* you need to be patient."

Crowsky watched the water closely, watching it flow by and waiting for his perfect moment to strike. "When--" Ebonypaw began to speak but Crowsky lifted his tail to silence her. At long last, Crowsky could see the dark figure of a fish beneath the surface of the river. His paw shot forward like a snake, breaking through the water. He felt his paw touch the slick side of the fish and he sank his claws into the fish's scales, pulling it out of the water and killing it with a swift bite.

"Wow!" Ebonypaw stared at his catch. "Can I try now? I want to catch a fish!" Crowsky nodded and Ebonypaw began staring deeply into the water, Crowsky couldn't help but feel amused by her determined glare.

After a few long moments, Ebonypaw struck the water, there was a large splash. Crowsky felt water hit his pelt but when her paw came out there was no fish. "Awh." Ebonypaw dropped her head. "I thought I had it!"

"You weren't fast enough." Crowsky explained. "You can't strike where the fish is, you have to strike where the fish is *going* to be."

"Huh?" Ebonypaw tilted her head, clearly confused by his words.

"If you strike just ahead of the fish then it will swim directly into your claws, then you hook it and pull it out of the water." Ebonypaw took a moment to examine her paws, flexing her sharp claws a few times. "We'll wait a bit for the fish to get their courage back and you can try again."

Ebonypaw had a few more failed attempts, but at long last, she caught her first fish. "I did it! I did it!" She jumped around in joy. "I caught a fish!" She looked at her trout proudly. "Can I give this to Skyclaw? He *loves* fish!"

"Absolutely." Crowsky purred, he was impressed with Ebonypaw. Her hunting skills weren't perfect, but she never allowed herself to be torn down by her mistakes, she learned from them and kept trying to improve herself which she did every time. *She's going to be a fast learner, I can tell.* "We'll head back to camp and tomorrow we'll do some swimming training."

"Yay!" Ebonypaw picked up her fish and they headed back to camp. Crowsky felt a warm sense of satisfaction flowing through his body. He had been wondering when he would find his paws in this forest, and at long last he finally felt like he was on the right path.

Chapter 36

Crowsky enjoyed the cool water splashing against his pelt, it was refreshing and soothing against the harsh greenleaf sun that beat over head. He watched Ebonypaw splash around in the water, enjoying the time she was spending with Shadepaw. Stonefoot sat on the edge of the pond watching. Crowsky knew that Stonefoot didn't really like swimming, but he used his age as an excuse. *The cold water hurts my bones.* He said, Stonefoot wasn't *that* old, he had a few strands of white in his gray muzzle.

Crowsky still loved swimming and the hot weather made it even more enjoyable. Not to mention, Shadepaw and Ebonypaw could swim and train at the same time. They could have fun while still building their muscles and swimming skills at the same time and Crowsky got to relax as well.

"Hey, Stonefoot!" Crowsky heard a voice in the background and saw Frostfire padding up from the camp. "Ivystone wants to talk to you." She mewed. "I can see Shadepaw home."

"Alright." Stonefoot stood up, stretching out his limbs. "I'll see you back at camp, Shadepaw!"

Shadpeaw nodded in agreement and continued playing with her sister. Crowsky swam up to the shore and stepped up to greet Frostfire. "What's that about?"

"Who knows." Frostfire shrugged. "Ivystone just wanted to talk to him. You lot have been out here for a while you'll turn into fish if you're not careful."

Crowsky playfully splashed Frostfire who stepped back in alarm. "If I do become a fish, be sure to not feed me to Skyclaw, he's a messy eater."

"No I'll feed you to Shadowpelt, maybe you'll give him a belly ache." Crowsky and Frostfire shared a laugh.

"I still don't know why he hates me so much." Crowsky admitted. "I didn't think me leaving affected him that much."

"No, it's not the fact that you left." Frostfire dropped her voice.

"Wait? You *know* why he doesn't like me?" Crowsky questioned. "Why?"

"It's a long story," Frostfire sighed.

"What is it?" Crowsky urged." You can tell me."

"Well..." Frostfire shuffled her paws. "After you left I kind of became friends with Shadowpelt, not long after I became a warrior he asked me if I wanted to be mates with him. I turned him down, and I guess...he's taking his anger out on you."

"W-why me?" Crowsky felt his pelt burning.

"He assumed that you were the reason I didn't want to be mates with him. He knew I--cared about you a lot, but the truth is I just didn't want to be mates with him regardless of my relationship with you. He's entitled and arrogant."

Crowsky wasn't sure what to do think about this. *Frostfire rejected him as a mate and he's blaming me?* Crowsky flicked his tail with annoyance. *I didn't think that Shadowpelt was that kind of a cat.*

"Well--" Crowsky looked at Ebonypaw and Shadepaw. "They should probably get home." Crowsky was certain that Frostfire didn't want to talk about Shadowpelt any longer. "Ebonypaw! Shadepaw! It's time to go home."

Shadepaw and Ebonypaw didn't complain but he could tell that could tell they didn't want to go. Regardless, the two she-cats swam to the shore and climbed out of the pond, shaking their pelts dry. "Can we have a race home to dry off?"

"Sure," Crowsky approved of their choice. "Just head straight home and take some prey to the elders."

In the blink of an eye, Ebonypaw and Shadepaw took off towards

the camp, vanishing across the moor. "They have so much energy." Frostfire stared longfully after the two apprentices.

"Yeah they do." Crowsky stepped in beside Frostfire. "Look, I'm sorry about making you talk about Shadowpelt."

"It's okay." Frostfire sighed. "It just hurts to think about it, we were pretty good friends for the time, he just let his feelings ruin it. I get that he wanted to be mates, but sometimes that doesn't always work out. He'll find the right cat someday. We all do."

"Yeah." Crowsky's eyes drifted up towards the sky, thinking about Ivy. *I had found mine.* He looked down at Frostfire, the distant look in her green eyes reminded Crowsky *of* Ivy for a moment. Whereas Ivy's eyes were curious, Frostfire's were steady and relaxed. *They're so different.* Ivy was curious and looked at the world with a sense of wonder, but Frostfire was certain, she was stable and she reminded Crowsky of home.

In the time he had been back, a lot of his time had been spent with Frostfire, he had always felt so comfortable around her, and that hadn't changed. "Everything okay?" Crowsky's pelt burned as he realized he had been staring at her.

"Y-yeah, sorry." He cleared his throat. "Let's go back to camp." Frostfire seemed concerned, but didn't push him. They began their walk back to camp in silence. *What's wrong with me?* Crowsky felt guilt creeping into his chest. *I love Ivy. Ivy was my mate, even if it was for a short time, we belonged to each other. I shouldn't be thinking about Frostfire this way, right?*

Crowsky looked up at the sky once again. *What would Ivy think, would she be mad at him? Would she want him to move on?* Crowsky felt like his heart was going to tear in two. *Why is this happening all of the sudden?*

"You seem off." Frostfire pointed out. "You sure you're alright?"

"Yeah." Crowsky assured her. "Just got a lot on my mind."

"I'm here to talk, you know that right?"

"Yeah, I do."

The two of them finally reached camp and Frostfire broke off to go talk to Icestorm, Crowsky was concerned that he had upset her. There was a storm brewing in his head, he needed someone to talk to, and it couldn't be Frostfire.

Crowsky spotted Silverpool sharing prey with Driftwater, he quickly padded up to her. "Hey," He greeted awkwardly, hating to interrupt them. "Can I talk to you for a moment, Silverpool?"

"Sure." Silverpool purred and touched her muzzle to Driftwater's. "I'll see you in a bit." Driftwater agreed and Silverpool stood up, looking at Crowsky. "Where did you want to go?"

"Let's just walk." Crowsky suggested and the two of them headed out of camp and onto the moor, heading in the direction of the Spirit Woods.

"What's on your mind?"

"A lot." Crowsky sighed.

"Well we've got plenty of time, tell me about it."

Crowsky wondered where to start. "When I was out there, I got injured." He lifted his paw and showed Silverpool the white scar that ran across his paw pad. "It got infected and I thought the worst until a cat named Flint found me, he told me he lived with a group of loners and took me to them where I was treated by a cat named Ivy." Silverpool nodded slowly, listening intently. Crowsky continued to tell the entire story of living with the loners, including Ivy's death and his feelings for her.

"I'm so sorry you had to experience that, Crowsky." Silverpool mewed sadly. "Though I think I know why you took me out here, it wasn't just to tell me that story." Crowsky stared at the moor ahead of him without responding.

"You have feelings for Frostfire, and your previous relationship with Ivy is making you feel guilty."

"Yeah." Crowsky's voice was dry, he wasn't surprised that Silverpool had figured it out so easily. "I don't know if I feel the same way about Frostfire that I did about Ivy, but I *do* care about her, I just don't know what to do."

"I'm assuming you know, but your father and I were mates for a short time after he had left Riverlight. We hadn't come public with it quite yet, but I loved him. I had always cared for your father, and when I became your mentor we just got so close." Silverpool's eyes flashed loved and sadness. "When he died and you left, I wasn't sure what would happen, then Driftwater came along. When I started falling for him, I felt guilty. I thought that Blacksky would hate me, that *you* would hate me."

"I could never hate you, Silverpool." Crowsky mewed. "I'm glad that you found happiness."

"And Ivy will feel the same way. She's in StarClan waiting for you, but that doesn't mean you can't have another mate if that's what you want. She'll want you to be happy, just as I and Blacksky do."

"I still don't even know what I want, or what she wants."

"When you left, a lot of cats thought you were dead or never coming back. Myself and Frostfire always believed that you would. She would come to me when she was missing you, and we would talk about you and it would make her feel better. When she turned down Shadowpelt, she came to me for advice. She was so conflicted, she told me that the only cat she could picture being her mate, was you." Crowsky's pelt burned. "She thought she would be just hurting herself if she waited for you to come back, but you did come back and now she's confused as you are. I believe that the best way you'll get your head sorted out is if you talk to her about your feelings."

Crowsky knew she was right, he just had to find the courage to speak to her, and the words along with it. Silverpool and Crowsky returned to camp, and now it was time to talk to Frostfire. She was sitting with Icestorm as she usually did. Silverpool nudged him forward, and Crowsky's heart began to race.

He padded up to Frostfire and Icestorm and cleared his throat. "Hey, Frostfire--" He stammered. "Will you come with me? I want to talk to you about something." Icestorm's eyes flickered with amusement. *She probably knows what this is.*

"Sure." Frostfire replied sheepishly and the two of them returned to the swimming pond. "What do you need?"

"I just talked to Silverpool and there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Is this about earlier? I'm sorry I brought up Shadowpelt I just--"

"Frostfire," Crowsky quieted her down. "It's okay. I'm glad you did because it got me thinking, about you and me. Silverpool told me about the things you two would talk about when I was gone."

Frostfire dropped her head. "Look," Her voice was low. "I always liked you, and I hoped every day that you would come home, and those feelings *never* went away but then you came back but you fell in love with someone else and it's okay, it's okay, I'm not going to let it ruin our friendship like Shadowpelt did."

"I did fall in love with someone else." Crowsky sighed. "But Ivy is gone, she's dead. I miss her, and I will always love her but that doesn't mean there's no more room in my heart for others. I don't know if I want kits or anything like that, but I don't think there's anything wrong with having someone close by my side, someone like you."

Frostfire stared at him, her eyes flooding with emotion. "You-you want me to be your mate?"

Crowsky nodded. "Since I've got back, I've always been drawn to you. You make me feel like I'm home."

Frostfire stepped forward, inching closer to Crowsky. "That's all I want, Crowsky. I just want to be by your side."

Crowsky leaned in slowly until his muzzle touched Frostfire's, he breathed in her sweet scent and closed his eyes. For the first time since Ivy's death, Crowsky felt complete. He still loved Ivy, but now

he wanted to focus his heart on Frostfire.

Chapter 37

Crowsky ate his prey slowly, patiently waiting for Ebonypaw to finish changing the elder's bedding. Frostfire sat beside him, washing her paws after finishing his own prey. As he ate his prey, he heard pawsteps approaching the Clan entrance. *Patrol must be returning.*

As they got closer, a strange but familiar scent filled his nose. *What is that?* Crowsky took the final bite of his prey and rose to his paws as the patrol entered the camp. Their faces were annoyed, and with them was a face that shocked Crowsky to his core. A slender, cream colored she-cat with narrow, beautiful blue eyes and darker markings.

"Raindrop." Crowsky breathed out the queens name, he didn't think he would *ever* see her again, but here she was, standing in MoonClan's camp's entrance.

"Do you *know* that cat?" Frostfire questioned, staring in awe at her sudden appearance.

"Yeah," Without another word, Crowsky jumped to his paws and hurried over to the patrol. "Raindrop!" He called her name.

"Crowpaw!" Raindrop exclaimed and broke away from the patrol, much to their annoyance. She touched her muzzle to his cheek and purred loudly. "I'm so glad I found you, I've been looking for you."

"Why?" Crowsky questioned. "What about Cooper and the others?"

Raindrop shook her head slowly. "After you ran off a huge argument broke out between the group. Flint and Cooper almost fought. When we woke up the next day Cooper was gone, vanished in the middle of the night. Flint went out to try and find you but all he found was blood in the snow. He came back and after that we all went our separate ways. Leo and Rudy went beyond the farm and Flint and Sabra went deeper into the forest. I was left alone, I didn't

know where else to go so I started wandering. I ended up in another twolegplace and met a kittypet who had told me she saw you, so I figured I would try and find you and I met these cats."

"Crowsky," Cloudstar spoke up, looking at the two of them with confusion in her eyes. "Care to explain who this is?"

"Crow*sky*?" Raindrop tilted her head. "Oh right, you change your names. You must be a warrior now."

Crowsky nodded. "Everyone this is an old friend I met when I was out of the camp, her name is Raindrop. She was always very kind to me."

"Why is she here?" Hawkface questioned, his eyes suspicious.

"As I explained to Crowpa--Crowsky. I was just wandering, I don't like travelling alone. I've always been in the company of other cats and I missed that. So I found the one cat I knew out in this place. I'm glad to see you doing so well."

"I'm glad to see you as well." Crowsky purred loudly and looked to Frostfire and Silverpool who had approached. "Raindrop, this is my mate Frostfire and this is Silverpool."

"Crowsky talked a lot about you, Silverpool." Raindrop bowed her head respectfully. "He missed you a lot."

"You seem nice." Silverpool purred happily. "It makes me happy knowing that Crowsky had such good company while he was out there."

"Crowsky," Cloudstar raised her voice slightly. "I understand that you are excited to see your friend, but we don't usually allow loners to just wander into our camp." Raindrop turned to face Cloudstar.

"You must be the Clan's leader, right?" Raindrop questioned.

Cloudstar nodded. "My name is Cloudstar."

"It's an honor to meet you, Cloudstar." Raindrop bowed. "And I bring your Clan no harm I promise. As I said before, I don't like

travelling alone. Before I had my twolegs, and then I had the loners but now I have no one. The best moments I have lived have been in the company of others, hunting and providing for each other. Crowsky told me a lot of Clan life and it is something I want to try, so that's why." Raindrop lowered herself to the ground. "If you'll have me, Cloudstar, I would like to join your Clan."

Crowsky stared in shock at Raindrop, he had no idea that she wanted to join MoonClan. "You wish to join our Clan?" Cloudstar questioned, looking at the loner with confusion in her eyes. "Crowsky told you of Clan life but did he share with you the hard times? The bitter leaf-bares filled with death and loss, the violent battles, the sickness and the loss of loved ones?"

"He told me that his sister died before she was even born, he told me that his father was killed in an unjust battle."

"Why would we ever accept a *kittypet* into the Clan?" It was Shadowpelt who spoke, his eyes burned with hatred and his claws scraped the earth of the hollow. "Kittypets lived pampered lives, they know nothing of the harsh world of the warrior."

"I was a kittypet once yes," Raindrop met Shadowpelt without flinching, her eyes bold. *No kittypet could ever face a warrior like that.* "But by the time I left I can guarantee that you weren't even alive. When I was a kittypet I had my kits stolen from me and was made to never have kits again. I left my twolegs and never turned back, I've faced death, harsh leaf-bares and fierce battles. I've had to defend myself tooth and nail, I've done things that no kittypet could ever imagine doing. So yes, I was a kittypet, but it's shaped me who I am. I've seen more of this world than even Crowsky has, I've lived a long life and I want to spend my final seasons in a group of cats who work together."

"Once a kittypet, *always* a kittypet." Shadowpelt spat. Crowsky felt irritation pricking his pelt. *Arrogant toad.*

"That's enough, Shadowpelt." Cloudstar hissed, the black tom ducked his head. "Raindrop, it's one thing to live a hard life as a loner, we warriors follow a strict code. You don't have the entire forest to roam, you would have to follow borders, you will have to

fight against our enemies when they threaten us."

"I can live within borders." Raindrop countered.

"MoonClan cats aren't like other warriors. We're fast, quick and agile. We run across open moorland, we hunt at night and we fish and swim in the rivers."

"I can be pretty fast." Raindrop mewed. "And I've never swam, but I don't fear the water."

Cloudstar narrowed her eyes, was she considering it? Crowsky would love to have Raindrop around. *It would be having a part of my time outside of the Clan with me all the time.* "Raindrop you seem like a good cat, you have a lot of experience behind you and MoonClan could always use that. I will allow you to spend five sunrises with our Clan. You will hunt with us, patrol with us and live with us. If you still wish to join the Clan, and my Clan will accept you, then you may join us."

"I ask nothing more than a chance, Cloudstar." Raindrop bowed her head.

"Then it is decided." Cloudstar raised her voice. "For the next five sunrises, Raindrop will be sharing our camp and learning our ways. I expect all of you treat her as a Clanmate, treat her with respect."

Cloudstar turned away and Crowsky rushed up to Raindrop. "I would love if it you joined the Clan." He mewed. "I've missed you and the other loners, I didn't think I would see any of you again."

"I've missed you as well, Crowsky." Raindrop purred, she looked at Frostfire and Silverpool. "And I'm so glad to meet those close to you."

"So what did you mean when you said that your twolegs took your kits away?" Silverpool questioned, her eyes curious.

"When you live with twolegs and give birth to kits they will often take them away when they're weaned off milk and give them to other twolegs. I haven't seen my kits since they left my belly."

"That's so sad." Silverpool mewed emphatically. "I couldn't imagine if someone took my kits again, it was hard enough losing Crowsky and he's not even my kit."

"It was hard," Raindrop admitted. "But I hold onto the idea that my kits are living happy, healthy lives and I'll always hold onto that. No matter how old I get or how far I roam."

"That's a very good way to think about it." Frostfire purred. "You seem like you have so many stories."

"Oh I do." Raindrop chuckled. "If I get to stay, I'll happily share all of them."

Raindrop almost instantly befriended Frostfire and Silverpool, but with each passing sunrise she befriended almost every cat in MoonClan. She was friendly, loving and skilled. She hunted with the Clan and patrolled with them as a normal warrior. She made herself right at home and pretty much every cat had warmed up to her. If Crowsky didn't know any better he would've thought that Raindrop was born and raised in MoonClan.

One cat in particular had grown very close to Raindrop and that was Brambleflight. The tom had completely fallen for the she-cat, he looked at her like she was the moon itself and Raindrop felt the same way. It was obvious that Raindrop would be welcomed into the Clan by the final sunrise. The only cat who had an issue with her was Shadowpelt, but even his anger was starting to fade.

Crowsky pawed through the fresh-kill pile, looking for something for him and Frostfire to share, and he heard voices talking behind him. "I can't believe that Cloudstar is going to let that loner join." The raspy, angered voice came from Riverlight.

"She's done great things for the Clan." Skyclaw mewed. "She's friendly and a great hunter. She already knows how to fish."

"She's an outsider, she doesn't belong here." Riverlight snarled. Crowsky felt the fur rise along his spine in anger.

"At least she contributes to the Clan." Crowsky couldn't help himself from retorting without looking at Riverlight.

"*Excuse* me?" Riverlight stood up behind him, Crowsky turned to face his mother.

"I said at least she contributes to the Clan. You retired when you were young, you didn't do anything for the Clan after I was born."

"At least I didn't run away like a coward." Riverlight bared her teeth. "You're an *embarrassment* to the Clan."

"To the Clan, or just you?" Crowsky stepped forward, he had never had the confidence to face off against his mother and now he did. "Cause it seems like the only two cats who hate me are you and Shadowpelt who is just jealous." He lashed his tail. "You treated me like crowfood for so long when I was a kit and you wonder why I ran away. You blamed *me* for Blacksky's death and you blamed *me* for Ravenkit's death. Sorry that my sister died before she was even born, *sorry* that I ruined your life with my existence! Sorry I didn't have the gall to just die when I was born, sorry that I came back to this Clan and I'm *sorry* that I *ever* called you my mother!"

Crowsky didn't give Riverlight a chance to respond, he picked up a rabbit and stormed off. The entire Clan had watched their argument, but he didn't care what they thought. *I've needed to say that for so long.* He thought, feeling a weight lift off his shoulders.

"Wow." Frostfire stared at Crowsky in awe. "You actually stood up to your mother."

"She doesn't have any room to talk about Raindrop that way, she's amazing and Riverlight *isn't.* Both Silverpool *and* Raindrop have done a better job at being a mother to me than she ever could." He took an angered bite of his rabbit. "I'm done letting her tear me apart."

"I'm proud of you." Frostfire pressed her muzzle into Crowsky's neck, he rested his chin on her head. *I'm proud of me too.*

Movement caught Crowsky's attention as Cloudstar stepped out of

her den with Raindrop behind her. *Is it finally time?* Cloudstar moved to the center of camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

Crowsky and Frostfire quickly ate their rabbit and gathered with the rest of the Clan. Crowsky noticed that Riverlight wasn't showing her face, but she usually didn't at Clan meetings. She lived a reclusive life in the elder's den. "Raindrop has lived with us for five sunrises, and during this time she has made herself at home. I know personally I have enjoyed having her around, she had provided for us and made friends, and even more." Cloudstar eyed Brambleflight playfully. "I don't think any cat here would disagree with her joining us."

She waited for a moment and no cat spoke up. "Then it is decided." Cloudstar faced Raindrop. "Raindrop, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life."

"I do." Raindrop's voice was light and eager, she would make a wonderful MoonClan warrior.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you a warrior name, from this day forward you will be known as Rainypelt. MoonClan honors your kindness and skill and I am proud to welcome you as a true member of MoonClan!"

Rainypelt and Cloudstar exchanged the ritual that had been done so many times before, and Rainypelt stepped back with shimmering eyes. "I never thought that my name would change, but this name feels good, it feels right. Thank you Cloudstar, and thank you all of MoonClan for welcoming me."

"Rainypelt! Rainypelt!" The Clan cheered their new Clanmate and Crowsky ran up to her to congratulate her. *Having her here has been so wonderful.* Crowsky thought, and he thought about the life he was living. He had a mate, cats who loved him and parts of both of his life living in the same camp. *I couldn't be happier.*

Chapter 38

"I hope you two are ready." Crowsky looked over Ebonypaw and Shadepaw, their faces showed a fierce determination. "If you pass today, then you two will finally be warriors."

Stonefoot stepped forward. "You will hunt by yourselves for the first part, and then you will come back and practice your team hunting. Finally, you will catch fish. We will judge you based on your skills. While you're hunting you won't be able to see us, but we will be there watching you."
"Do your best." Crowsky encouraged. "You have trained hard, and I believe you two are ready to take on this assessment."

"We won't let you down." Ebonypaw promised, her eyes shimmering.

"Yeah, we'll do our best!" Shadepaw agreed.

"Then you should do fine." Stonefoot purred. "Get started, Ebonypaw you will hunt closer to SunClan territory and Shadepaw you will hunt closer to the twolegplace." We will bring you back here at sunhigh."

Crowsky looked up at the sky, it was early morning so the two sisters would have plenty of time to get their hunting done. Stonefoot and Crowsky waited for Ebonypaw and Shadepaw to make some ground in their respective directions before setting out to follow them.

Crowsky crept through the heather, following Ebonypaw's scent trail, it didn't take long for him to find her due to her jet black pelt. Crowsky would have to take care to keep himself hidden.

Ebonypaw had already spotted her first piece of prey, a large sparrow landing on the ground, pecking at the ground. Ebonypaw's steps were silent, she took gentle steps forward creeping after her prey. Crowsky was impressed with her hunting skills, she had

certainly grown and matured into a sharp skilled she-cat.

The sparrow was completely unaware of Ebonypaw, it didn't even have time to spread its wings before Ebonypaw had killed it. She quickly buried her kill and moved on. Crowsky almost couldn't believe that his apprentice was nearly a warrior, it seemed like time had gone by so quickly. Five moons ago Crowsky and Frostfire had become mates, and a lot had happened since then.

All of the apprentices with the exception of Ebonypaw and Shadepaw were warriors now, and a battle with AshClan had broken out over an argument at a gathering. During the battle, Spidertail had died. They had also lost Haretooth, the elder had passed in his sleep due to his old age.

MoonClan was constantly changing, and leaf-bare was rapidly approaching. *We'll be prepared, but change is coming.* Crowsky continued following Ebonypaw as she hunted, watching her catch two rabbits and another sparrow. As the sun rose to the center of the sky, Crowsky stepped out of the heather to face Ebonypaw.

"Good hunting, Ebonypaw." He dipped his head. "Let's gather your prey and meet back up with Stonefoot and Shadepaw."

They headed back to the pool and reached it just before Stonefoot and Shadepaw. Shadepaw had caught three rabbits and looked impressed with her catch. "Alright," Stonefoot mewed. "Now we want to see your team hunting. The two of you will work together to track and catch a rabbit. First Ebonypaw will lead and then Shadepaw will lead. You will catch two rabbits and return to us."

"Alright." Ebonypaw nodded and looked at Shadepaw. "Let's head out!" The two sisters set out into the moor and Stonefoot and Crowsky began following them shortly after. As Crowsky tracked Ebonypaw he also caught the scent of rabbit, the two of them were clearly tracking it.

Crowsky and Stonefoot sheltered in a patch of brush. It was Ebonypaw who was stalking the rabbit, and they couldn't see Shadepeaw quite yet. The rabbit was near its burrow so Ebonypaw would have to act quickly. She kept herself hidden and her

pawsteps silent. She walked sideways while keeping her intense yellow gaze burned into the rabbit. *She's rotating around it so she'll get it away from the burrow. She'll have to watch her paws though.*

Crowsky saw Ebonypaw waving her tail, signaling Shadepaw who was still out of sight. Crowsky scanned the moorland, spotting a large overgrowth of heather, he assumed thats where Shadepaw was hiding.

In an instant, Ebonypaw shot forward letting out a sharp yowl. The rabbit clearly wanted to run into its burrow but Ebonypaw was moving far too quickly, the rabbit turned away from its home and was running directly for the heather where Shadepaw was hidden.

As the rabbit neared the heather, Shadepaw burst out into the open and pounced onto the rabbit, biting into its neck and killing it instantly. *What a good catch.* Crowsky thought happily.

The rest of the assessment went without any issues and Ebonypaw and Shadepaw both returned to camp with their heads held high and plenty of prey. The fresh-kill pile would be full for a while, and MoonClan would be welcoming two new warriors.

"Go ahead and tell your friends." Crowsky mewed. "We're going to go talk to Cloudstar." Together, he and Stonefoot padded to the leader's den and stepped inside.

"Welcome back." Cloudstar purred. "How did the assessment go?"

"Wonderfully." Stonefoot purred. "Shadepaw is more than ready to become a warrior, she's an amazing hunter."

"As is Ebonypaw, she's ready."

"Then we won't waste any more time!"

Cloudstar, Stonefoot and Crowsky all left the den and Cloudstar called the meeting. Ebonypaw and Shadepaw sat in the center of camp, eager to get started. "I've gathered the Clan today because our two final apprentices have passed their assessment and are ready to receive their warrior names." Ebonypaw and Shadepaw were clearly struggling to sit still. "I call upon my warrior ancestors

to look down on these two apprentices, they have trained long and hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Cloudstar faced the apprentices. "Ebonypaw, Shadepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do." Shadepaw spoke firmly.

"I do." Crowsky couldn't doubt the certainty in Ebonypaw's voice.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names. Ebonypaw, from this day forward you will be known as Ebonywing. MoonClan honors your kindness and energy." Ebonywing licked Cloudstar's shoulder and Cloudstar rested her muzzle on Ebonywing's forehead. "Shadepaw, from this day forward you will be known as Shadeflower. MoonClan honors your hunting skill and compassion. I happily welcome you both as full warriors of MoonClan!"

"Ebonywing! Shadeflower! Ebonywing! Shadeflower!" The Clans cheered their newest warriors and the two were swarmed with loved ones and friends. Once again, Crowsky caught the toxic glare of Shadowpelt which hadn't improved in the time that he and Frostfire had become mates. *Not my problem.* Crowsky thought, he was happy.

"Cloudstar," A voice spoke up from the crowd, it belonged to Stonefoot. "There's one thing I have to ask of you."

"What is it, Stonefoot?"
"Training Shadeflower has made me realize just how old I'm getting, and I believe that it's time for me to retire. I've lived a long, happy life as a MoonClan warrior but I want to spend my final days resting, watching my Clan grow."

"Then I'll perform the ceremony, thank you for many moons of service Stonefoot." Stonefoot took a deep breath. "Stonefoot, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"

"It is."

"Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest." Stonefoot was welcomed into the den by the elders, and Crowsky looked at Riverlight for a moment. In the entire time that he had been back, he hadn't spoken a single word to his mother. *I should stop thinking of her as such.* Crowsky thought. Riverlight wanted nothing to do with him, and he wanted nothing to do with her.

The Clan returned to their usual duties after the ceremony while Stonefoot settled with his new denmates and Ebonywing and Shadeflower prepared for their vigil. However, the warriors den had become so overcrowded that Mistflower, Ashfeather, Stormfall and Ravenwing were all still in the apprentice den and Ebonywing and Shadeflower would be staying there as well. They didn't have anymore apprentices and they didn't have any queens, nursing *or* expecting. *Soon enough.* Crowsky thought.

I can't wait to see how my Clan grows.

Chapter 39

Flakes fell slowly from the sky, Crowsky suppressed a shiver as he carried his prey back to camp. Leaf-bare had began, and the harsh season would soon be taking over the forest but Crowsky wasn't too scared. *MoonClan has always been resilient during the cold seasons.* They had no young kits to get greencough and many warriors were strong, he was sure they would be okay.

It had been a moon and a half since Rainypelt was welcomed into the Clan and it felt like she had been born into the Clan. She hunted happily with her new Clanmates, shared tongues with new friends and had fallen fast for Brambleflight. It was clear to the entire Clan that they two of them had become mates, and Brambleflight didn't seem bothered by the fact that Rainypelt couldn't have kits, he seemed to love her just the same.

Crowsky felt similar, he loved Frostfire but he didn't really want kits. It wasn't who he was and Frostfire understood that, he just loved having her around. She kept his heart high and full. Having Rainypelt around felt like he had a piece of his old life with him. She reminded him of the loners, he reminded him of Ivy. He had been so happy during that time, and when he lost Ivy he didn't think he would ever find happiness again but he finally did.

He found his happiness in Frostfire, in Silverpool, in Rainypelt and in training Ebonywing.

Ebonywing was adjusting well to life as a warrior, Crowsky could hardly believe that she had ever been an apprentice. *Time has been soaring by, and I'm okay with it.* Crowsky had finished a patrol earlier and was waiting for Frostfire to return from hunting so they could share prey. As he waited, Crowsky heard movement at the head of camp and the sharp tang of fear scent. He stood up, his fur rising. He spotted a patrol returning to camp, he knew that Ivystone's patrol was the one out right now, and sure enough he saw the deputy. Ivystone was behind held up by Shadeflower and Pigeonpelt with Stormfall, Cinderfur and Blossomfrost behind them.

Ivystone's voice was contorted, her eyes burning with pain. Crowsky noticed that Ivystone's hind leg was twisted at an awkward angle. *What in the name of StarClan happened.* Stonefoot ran from the elder's den to Ivystone's side and looked at her, eyes filled with concern. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"I'll explain." Cinderfur mewed. "She needs to go see the medicine cats." Stonefoot watched painfully as Ivystone was guided to the medicine cat den. "We were out hunting and Ivystone was chasing a rabbit, there was a rabbit burrow covered with snow, she didn't see it. She was moving so fast that she hurt her leg, we're pretty sure that it's broken."

"She should be fine." Stormfall assured him. "But it looks bad, she'll probably be off duties for a couple moons at least."

"I'm going to go check on her." Stonefoot turned away and trotted through the snow towards the medicine cat den.

The Clan waited nervously for the news of their deputy, if she was going to be off duties for a few moons, then how would she be deputy for the Clan? What would she do? The following day, Crowsky heard word that Ivystone's leg *was* in fact broken and she wouldn't be able to hunt or patrol for at *least* two moons.

Crowsky watched Cloudstar venture into the medicine cat den, presumably to talk to Ivystone about what the entire Clan was thinking. She was in the medicine cat den for a long time, when she finally came out, Ivystone followed with Stonefoot supporting her up.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Crowsky gathered with the rest of his Clan, sitting with Frostfire, Icestorm, Rainypelt and Silverpool as he usually did. "You all know by now, but Ivystone has broken her leg. I didn't know what to do given her title as our deputy, but she has something that she wants to say."

With Stonefoot as her support, Ivystone began to speak. "With my leg broken I will be off duties for a long time. Since yesterday I've been thinking about this, my age is starting to show. I've happily

led this Clan along with Cloudstar since she was made our leader, but I believe that I am no longer the best choice as deputy for this Clan." Gasps spread out throughout the entire Clan.

"Just because your leg is broken doesn't mean you can't be our deputy!" Smudgenose argued. "You're a great deputy!"

"I've loved being MoonClan's deputy, but I've made my choice. I'm stepping down as MoonClan's deputy and retiring to the elder's den along with Stonefoot while I recover. It's time for MoonClan to have a new deputy, someone younger than me, someone more fit to lead this Clan when the time comes."

Cloudstar nodded slowly. "My lives are wearing thin, so there's a high chance whoever I chose will become the next leader of MoonClan. I respect Ivystone's decision, and I am grateful for her service as my deputy from the moment that I received my nine lives. So I shall grant her wish. "Ivystone, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"

"It is."

"Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest." With those words, MoonClan was without a deputy. Crowsky wondered who would take her place, who would be MoonClan's next leader? "I've already chosen my next deputy." Cloudstar continued. "I say these words before the spirits of StarClan, so they may hear and approve my choice. Crowsky will be the new deputy of MoonClan!"

Crowsky's jaw dropped and he stood frozen in place. *Me?* He could hardly believe what he had heard and all eyes of MoonClan bore into his pelt. *I never once thought about leading this Clan, why did she choose me?* "Cloudstar I--"

"Since you returned you have placed your roots within this Clan, you've found your way to us and brought us prey, kindness and joy. I trust you to be this Clan's deputy, I know you will do right by MoonClan."

Crowsky's throat felt dry, he didn't expect this, but he wouldn't let

his Clan down. "I wasn't expecting this, but I vow to all of MoonClan that I will do my best to serve MoonClan as your deputy, thank you for this chance and I hope I can live up to the legacy that Ivystone created."

"Crowsky! Crowsky!" Feeling his name be cheered by his Clanmates, he never once expected this but now that it was his life he felt inclined to serve his Clan to the best of his ability. *I won't let MoonClan down.*

Chapter 40

Crowsky sank his teeth into the rabbit's spine, killing it instantly. The rabbit's warm blood touched his tongue and made his stomach growl, but he didn't dare take this prey for himself. Crowsky set his rabbit down and looked around, Frostfire would be around here somewhere, hopefully she was able to catch something as well. He looked at his rabbit, it was plump, it would be able to feed the entire elder's den. *Thank you StarClan for this catch.* He mewed silently and buried his rabbit, moving on to try and find more prey.

Crowsky had been deputy for half a moon and in that half-moon leafbare had come in full force. Being deputy was strange, but he was starting to get used to it. He found it odd that cats were coming to him for duties and what to do with their paws for the day. Even Shadowpelt had been listening to his orders.

Crowsky caught Frostfire's scent and followed it until he spotted her across the moor. She was creeping after a rabbit so Crowsky ducked behind some heather to watch her hunt, the last thing he wanted to do was get in her way. Frostfire quickly broke into a sprint after the rabbit, it started to run away from her but Frostfire was too quick, she gave a mighty leap and her paws landed squarely on the rabbit's back, she killed it and held her head high.

"Great catch." Crowsky called, trotting up to his mate. He pressed his muzzle to hers, welcoming her warmth.

"Thanks, have you caught anything?" Frostfire questioned.

Crowsky nodded. "I've got a pretty nice rabbit back there, I'm going to give it to the elders."

"Sounds good, I might give this one to Cloudstar." Frostfire nudged it. "It's not big, but she could share it."

"We should head back, then." Crowsky looked around. "I bet the elder's are getting hungry."

"We're all hungry." Frostfire replied.

"Then let's get home, hopefully Cinderfur and Lightningwing caught some prey as well." Frostfire and Crowsky gathered the prey they had caught and met up with their huntingmates. Cinderfur and Lightningwing both caught two small rabbits, they returned to camp and the sense of grief overcame him.

Sickness had come in swiftly, several cats were already starting to get sick. Certain cats he knew were sick were Longwhisker, Squirrelpelt, Skyclaw and Riverlight. Crowsky had rejected his mother as she had rejected him, but there was a part of him that didn't want Riverlight to die, he didn't want *any* of his Clanmates to die.

Crowsky carried his rabbit across camp to where the elders were resting. Skyclaw and Riverlight were in the medicine cat den, but several elders still remained. "Is that for us?" Thorntalon questioned, lifting his head and sniffing the air.

Crowsky set the rabbit down in front of their nests. "Yes, I hope you enjoy it."

"Thank you Crowsky." Ivystone purred, she was still recovering from her broken leg but she stayed in the elder's den while she was healing. "You've been a great deputy to this Clan."

"I've been trying my best." Crowsky replied, his pelt burning slightly. "I just want to keep my Clanmates fed."

"That's all you can do during this time." Ivystone purred. He left the elders to enjoy their meal and turned out of the den. He gazed up at the sky, finding it hard to believe that last leaf-bare he had lost Ivy and he had returned to his Clan. So much had changed, and so much would continue to change.

Crowsky oversaw that the entire Clan had fed before finally helping himself to what remaind on the fresh-kill pile. He grabbed a small trout and moved over to the warrior's den to eat his prey. It wasn't fresh and was very cold, but it helped to quell the hunger in his stomach. *This is going to be a long season, but we'll make it, we always*

do.

As Crowsky finished his trout he noticed Ravenheart leaving the medicine cat den, crossing the camp towards him. *Oh no.* His stomach twisted in a knot. "Hi, Ravenheart." Crowsky stood up to face the medicine cat. "Is everything alright?"

Ravenheart slowly shook his head. "No, Riverlight is very close to death. She's always been weak, her body isn't strong enough to fight this illness." Crowsky dropped his head, Riverlight had never been a mother to him. She rejected him, treated him like crowfood and hated him, but she was still the cat that gave birth to him. "She knows this as well, and she wants to talk to you."

"Me?" Crowsky looked up in alarm. "Why me?"

"I don't know." Ravenheart shrugged. "You don't have to if you don't want to, no cat will blame you."

Crowsky stood up. "I'll go, I want to hear what she has to say." Crowsky followed Ravenheart across the camp and they stepped into the medicine cat den. The sharp stench of sickness filled his nose. *It's bad in here.* Crowsky looked at Riverlight, she was in her nest. Her black pelt was thin and dull, lined with white and gray. Her once beautiful blue eyes were glossed over and empty. *She's always looked bad, but this is something else.*

"You came." Riverlight breathed out, her eyes filling with surprise. Her voice was dry. "I figured you wouldn't."

"I wanted to hear what you wanted to say." Crowsky sat down, resting his tail across his paws. Riverlight weakly lifted her head, meeting Crowsky's gaze.

"There's a lot I need to say, a lot I *should* have said. As I face death, I've had time to think about the things I've done with my life, and I'm not proud of them. I never should have treated you the way that I did, I know these words mean nothing now, but I need to say them. When I die, I want to clear some of my regrets." Her eyes were haunted, it pained Crowsky's heart. He had never expected an apology from Riverlight, he figured he would live the rest of his life

with her hating him. "I don't expect you to forgive me, or to even care about what I'm saying, but it needs to be said. I was so broken hearted over the death of your sister that I let it destroy me, I let it kill me long before my life was over.

"When you left, I knew it was because of me. I didn't know what to think. When you returned I was even more confused, but I realized that you didn't need me. No cat needed me, I was nothing but a burden on the Clan. I destroyed my own life, and blamed you for it. So I'm sorry, Crowsky, I'm sorry I made your life so hard, I'm sorry that I wasn't a good mother to you, I'm sorry that I didn't give you what you needed."

Crowsky could feel how genuine her words were, he wished that it didn't have to take Riverlight dying for her to see this, he wished they could have formed a relationship before they died. "I forgive you, Riverlight." It was four simple words, but Crowsky could see how much they meant to his mother.

"Y-you do?" Riverlight's blue eyes filled with light for the first time in seasons.

"Yes." Crowsky rested his muzzle on Riverlight's head. 'You'll always be my mother, I just wish I could've have known you before Ravenkit died. I wish I could've known the mother that my father fell in love with."

Riverlight's body shivered with a sob. "I wish that too." She buried her muzzle in Crowsky's chest. "Thank you, Crowsky."

Crowsky left Riverlight to rest after they shared a moment together, his heart ached as he left the medicine cat den. "What were you doing in there?" Frostfire questioned as he approached her. "Are you okay?"

"My mother apologized to me." Crowsky explained.

"Wow." Frostfire's eyes went wide. "StarClan must have frozen over."

"She's dying," Crowsky replied. "I never expected this, but I'm glad that she can spend her final days knowing that I do care about her,

I never once stopped."

"It must have taken a lot for you to do that, she treated you so *horribly*."

Crowsky nodded. "I know, but it was the right thing to do." Crowsky and Frostfire retired to their nests for the night and when he woke up the next morning, Riverlight had passed. She died silently in her sleep. Crowsky's heart ached, it felt strange knowing he would never see his mother again but he also knew that Riverlight could finally be happy again, she would be reunited with Ravenkit at long last.

Crowsky sat beside his mother's still body during her vigl, pressing his muzzle to her pelt. *Goodbye mother.* Crowsky thought. *I hope your path to StarClan was easy, say hello to Ivy and Blacksky for me.*

The vigil ended and Crowsky watched as the elders carried away his mother's body, something about him felt different. He was glad that he forgave her, it wouldn't erase the abuse, but at least she died peacefully. Behind Crowsky he heard coughing, he looked over his shoulder and his blood turned to ice.

The coughing came from Silverpool.

Chapter 41

"How is she doing?" Crowsky questioned Ravenheart as the medicine cat sniffed the dwindling fresh-kill pile.

"Same as this morning, Crowsky." Ravenheart replied, flicking his ears in annoyance. "She's very sick, but she's hanging on for now." He met Crowsky's gaze, nothing about his expression quelled Crowsky's fears. "I will let you know if anything changes, just keep the Clan fed. You have a duty to the Clan, Crowsky. Leave Silverpool to me."

Ravenheart walked away, leaving Crowsky feeling cold and terrified. Crowsky sighed and turned away from the fresh-kill pile, he wasn't hungry. He barely slept the past moon knowing that Silverpool was riddled with greencough. *I hate not being able to do anything.* Crowsky lashed his tail. *I don't know what I'll do if I lose her.*

"Hey there." Crowsky heard a soothing voice and saw Frostfire padding up to him from the warrior's den. "Any word on Silverpool?"

Crowsky shook his head. "Still sick." He scraped his claws against the frozen ground. "I can't seem to focus on anything." He grit his teeth. "I can't lose Silverpool, I already lost my birth mother, what will I do without her?"

Frostfire's green eyes clouded with sadness. "Crowsky, even if you do lose Silverpool, you'll be able to go on. You're not the cat you used to be." Crowsky stepped back, lightning striking his heart.

"Don't even say that." He growled. "I don't want to think about losing her, as of right now I'm not thinking of that as an option." He stormed away from Frostfire, unable to control his emotions. He didn't like arguing with her, but the thought of losing Silverpool was too much for him to think about.

"Crowsky," A mew spoke up from beside him. He looked to see Dovestorm padding up with him. "Who do you want for the next patrols." Crowsky's head was too troubled to think of patrols.

"Uh," He thought for a moment. "I guess--you can lead the next hunting patrol." Cats started gathering around him. "Take Dogtail, Longwhisker, Cedarclaw and Snakepelt."

"I *just* got back from the last border patrol." Cedarclaw mewed in annoyance. "You want me to go on another patrol right away?"

"Err, no, sorry." Crowsky felt like he was getting overwhelmed. "You can go on the night hunting patrol later, and uh--" His eyes scanned the crowd, trying to remember who had already been on a patrol. "Brambleflight you can go in his place." No cat complained. "The next border patrol will be Rainypelt, Cinderfur, Longwhisker--"

"So I'm supposed to do *both* patrols?" Longwhisker asked, looking skeptical.

"S-sorry, I--"

"Are you doing alright, Crowsky?" Rainypelt questioned, concern lining her mews.

"I just--" Crowsky felt completely overwhelmed. *I can't handle this.*

"Give him a moment," It was Shadowpelt who stepped forward. "Someone Crowsky cares about is very sick, it makes sense that his mind is a little cloudy." Crowsky stared in shock that *Shadowpelt* of all cats had stepped up for him. "If you need to take a break, I can take over patrols if you don't mind."

Crowsky felt slightly suspicious, but he decided not to question him too much. "Thank you, Shadowpelt." Crowsky bowed his head, maybe Shadowpelt really had matured and gotten over what happened countless moons ago. Crowsky wanted to get his paws out on the moor, but he wanted to do it alone.

Crowsky quickly padded out of camp and onto the moorland. It felt like it had been so long since he ventured out on his own. Ever since he returned he always had cats to hunt with. Crowsky began

running, his paws kicking up snow. The air was cold, it bit at his ears and nose, but once he started going, his pumping blood kept him warm enough.

Without realizing it, Crowsky had nearly reached the twolegplace, he skidded to a stop, his heart pounding in his chest. He stared out into the twolegplace, it seemed like so unbelievably long ago that Crowsky had left his territory, the twolegplace seemed so foreign to him now. Once again, Crowsky thought of Ivy.

He looked up towards the sky. "Ivy," he spoke. "If you can hear me, please don't take Silverpool from me. I love her, I need her." Crowsky knew that Silverpool's age was showing, she wasn't as young and lithe as she used to be. There was a high chance that Silverpool wouldn't survive this illness. *I can't let her death destroy me, but what do I do?*

Crowsky, even if you do lose Silverpool, you'll be able to go on. You're not the cat you used to be. Frostfire's voice rang in his ears. *I shouldn't have snapped at her, she was just trying to help.* Crowsky turned back towards camp, he had to apologize to her.

Crowsky ran through the snow back to camp, he spotted Frostfire staring at a piece of prey. He padded up to her, his ears low. "Frostfire, I'm sorry." He mewed. She lifted her head and looked up at him. "I shouldn't have snapped at you, I'm just scared to lose Silverpool."

"I know you are." Frostfire stood up, pressing her muzzle to his. "Believe me, I know what it's like to lose a parent. I felt the same way when Owlstar died, it sucks not being able to do anything but hunt and wait. No matter what happens to Silverpool, you'll be okay Crowsky. You'll always have her love, whether she's in the stars in the Clan with us."

"I know." Crowsky sighed, breathing in Frostfire's sweet scent. "Thank you, Frostfire. I know for a fact I wouldn't be able to handle this without you."

Crowsky forced himself to eat some prey, even if it was a little bit. As he and Frostfire ate, he spotted Badgerstripe crossing camp. He

had worry written across his face, and trouble deep within his yellow eyes. *What's wrong?* Crowsky wondered, it didn't look like grief as if someone had died, but as if he feared someone would. Crowsky's heart dropped as he realized Badgerstripe was going to the leader's den.

"I'll be right back." Crowsky rose to his paws and quickly trotted over to the leader's den and poked his head inside. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Crowsky." Cloudstar replied, Crowsky was shocked at how dry her voice was, her eyes and nose were streaming and her blue gaze was dull.

"You're sick, Cloudstar." Badgerstripe mewed sharply. "Crowsky you should get out of here, we don't need our leader *and* deputy sick."

"Right," Crowsky hesitantly turned away and returned to Frostfire.

"What's going on?" She questioned.

"Cloudstar is sick."

"Oh no," Frostfire tensed. "Is this her last life?"

"I don't know." Crowsky sighed. *I'm not ready to be leader, this can't be her last life.* Crowsky closed his eyes and Frostfire must have sensed his stress because she began rasping her tongue across his pelt, keeping him warm and helping him relax. With Frostfire at his side, Crowsky spent the rest of his day trying to ignore the turmoil that was gripping the ones he loved.

Crowsky stepped out into the chilly morning air, longing for the warmth of Frostfire, but patrols had to be done. He needed to get patrols done, he couldn't dump his responsibilities onto Shadowpelt again. As he woke himself up, he caught a black and white pelt leaving the medicine cat den, it was Badgerstripe with grief-stricken eyes. *No.*

"Crowsky," Badgerstripe stepped forward.

"Is Silverpool--"

"She took a turn for the worse last night, she doesn't have much time and she wants to talk to you." Crowsky's shattered inside his chest. *This is it.* The walk to the medicine cat den seemed to take forever, the world around him slowed. *I have to say goodbye.* His pawsteps felt heavy, the snow threatened to freeze them to the ground. It felt like moments ago that Crowsky was making this same walk to talk to Riverlight.

As he padded through the snow towards the den he thought about all the time he spent with Silverpool. When he was barely a kit and she reached out to him, inviting him to a simple game. She became his mentor, they swam together, hunted together and fished together with Blacksky at their side.

Silverpool vowed to take care of him when Riverlight wouldn't, she became his true mother. When Blacksky died, she held him close and safe. When he ran away, Silverpool followed him until she let him follow his own path and when he finally returned, she welcomed him back with just as much love as when he left. *She's the most important cat in my life.*

Crowsky finally reached the medicine cat den and stepped inside, Silverpool was curled up in her nest. She lifted her head weakly. "Oh, Crowsky..." She breathed out, her voice low and dry. Crowsky felt his legs begin to shake, he nearly sprinted across the medicine cat den and buried his nose in Silverpool's pelt.

"I don't want to lose you." He wept. "You've given me so much, you're everything to me."

"I hate to leave you." Silverpool rested her head on Crowsky's head. "But it's my time, you're strong, you'll be okay when I pass." Crowsky lifted his head, his eyes burning into hers. "You look so much like Blacksky," She closed her eyes and lifted her head towards the sky. "I can't wait to see him again."

Crowsky pressed his muzzle into her chest. "Tell him I miss him, please. I love him, and I love you."

"I love you too, Crowsky. Always, never forgot that." Silverpool purred. "When I'm gone, don't be sad for me, live on, follow your

path and hold onto love, never let it go."

"I won't." Crowsky's body trembled. "I love you, Silverpool. I'll never forget the things you did for me."

The two of them stopped talking, Crowsky curled up beside his true mother. The cat who cared for him, loved him and encouraged him no matter what. His heart never wanted to let her go, but he didn't have a choice.

"I'm coming, Blacksky." Silverpool whispered and Crowsky felt her heartbeat get slower and slower until it came to a complete stop. She was gone, guided to the stars by Blacksy. Crowsky stayed where he was, he wanted to feel her warmth for the last time, before it was gone forever.

At long last, Crowsky rose to his paws. He took one long look at Silverpool's lifeless form, she looked like she was sleeping but he knew so much better. *May StarClan guide your paws, Silverpool. I'll see you again.* He pressed his muzzle to hers and turned to Badgerstripe. "Thank you for all you do, thank you for caring for her."

"It's my honor to serve this Clan." Badgerstripe bowed his head. Crowsky stepped out into the camp, feeling like a part of him was gone. He looked up towards the sky. *Not gone, just far away.* He told himself.

Crowsky spotted Driftwater leaving from the warriors den. *He needs to know.* Crowsky padded over to Driftwater, the cat had been so kind to him, not a new father, but he cared as one. "Driftwater," Crowsky was surprised at how weak his voice was. "Silverpool is gone."

Grief flooded his eyes. "Were you with her?" Crowsky nodded. Driftwater took a deep breath. "Thank you, I hope she passed peacefully."

"She did." For a moment, Crowsky and Driftwater pressed against each other, bonded over their love of Silverpool. *This leafbare has been so hard.* Coughing made Crowsky's ear twitch, he turned

towards the leader's den. *And something tells me that it's not over yet.*

Chapter 42

"Stop fretting over me, Badgerstripe." Cloudstar scolded her medicine cat. "I am well enough to lead my Clan to the gathering!"

"Cloudstar, please." Badgerstripe pleaded. "You may only have whitecough but it can easily turned to greencough on a night like this."

"I've made my decision." She lashed her tail. "MoonClan!" She raised her voice, Crowsky could hear how raspy it was. "Let's get going."

"At least take some strength herbs." Cloudstar reluctantly agreed and Crowsky stood beside her as they headed out to the gathering. It had only been a few days since Silverpool died, her death would be announced to the Clans and Crowsky would have to face it.

In the days that followed Silverpool's death, Crowsky had been supported by Frostfire, Driftwater, Tawnytail and Smallstrike. It had been hard, but Crowsky focused hard on his duties as deputy and was able to keep his head above water.

The Clan finally arrived at the gathering hollow and huddled together to keep warm from the cold. Crowsky's eyes went to Elmstar, the cat had become leader of LichenClan and Crowsky wasn't sure what to think of him. He did his best to not talk to him, he had better things to do than to fret over Elmstar.

Crowsky realized that he couldn't see Jaggedtail at the leader's side, he hoped that nothing had happened to him but there wasn't a deputy in his place. The medicine cat Barkclaw was there, but looked incredibly nervous. He also noticed how tensed Elmstar looked, his claws scratched at the branch underneath his paws. *What's going on with him, it is it because Jaggedtail isn't here?*

The Clans wasted no time getting started and Foxstar started the gathering off. "First off, Stormwind gave birth to a healthy kit and Lakeflight should be giving birth soon as well. Despite the cold,

SunClan is thriving well and we haven't had any sickness." Despite what he said, Crowsky could hear how dry the leader's voice was.

"Good to hear." Ivystar nodded after Foxstar sat down. "AshClan is also doing well, we don't have much to report other than that we haven't had any sickness either and we have enough prey." Next was Cloudstar.

"MoonClan is doing well, but we are sad to announce the death of Silverpool." The Clans held a moment of silence. "We have sickness, but it's under control." Crowsky lowered his head, he hoped that somewhere in the stars above, Silverpool was watching over him.

"Your turn, Elmstar." Ivystar nodded at the LichenClan leader and Crowsky felt disturbed by the dark look in the LichenClan leader's eyes.

"My only announcement is to the other Clans." His voice was strained and tesne, it made Crowsky's fur stand on end. "Since I was young, LichenClan have been at odds with MoonClan, simply because they don't know how to forgive or forget." *Excuse me?* Crowsky flattened his ears, he hadn't been involved in that fight from what he understood, the two Clans had made peace. Gasps and mews of annoyance spread throughout MoonClan, the cats of LichenClan looked uncomfortable.

"You started that war yourself, Elmstar." Cloudstar growled, lashing her tail.

"And you had continue it, Cloudstar." Elmstar spat. We've had battles with MoonClan and AshClan alike, you want to hold grudges so I can do it too. You've messed with LichenClan one too many times!"

"What in the name of StarClan is he talking about?" Icestorm hissed.

"Has he gone mad?" Shadowpelt questioned. "What a mouse-brain."

I don't like this. Crowsky flexed his claws nervously, he could tell the other deputies were nervous as well.

"There's one Clan here who hasn't dared attack us." Elmstar's dark

eyes burned into Foxstar's pelt. "I don't want you thinking you're safe. You have to know that LichenClan is a force to be reckoned with." *Why would he threaten SunClan, especially during leafbare? This is no time for battles!*

"I hope you're not threatening my Clan." Foxstar's voice was cold and sharp, he didn't seem too phased by Elmstar's threat.

"And if I am?" Elmstar bared his teeth.

"Then you'll regret it." Foxstar's voice was dangerous. "You are a young leader, since you have nine lives you think you can do whatever you want. You think you can win any battle or fight any war. If you think like that then your nine lives will be gone before you can blink." Foxstar jumped down from his tree, casting one final look at Elmstar. "If you try and fight me and my Clan you will lose, Elmstar. SunClan! We're leaving!"

"Run away, Foxstar!" Elmstar taunted. "I'll see you on the battlefield! I won't lose!"

"You're insane, Elmstar." Cloudstar growled.

"No, Cloudstar. I'm a fearless leader who will drive LichenClan into a life of victory!"

"MoonClan, let's go." Cloudstar jumped down. "You've gone mad, Elmstar. Don't involve us with your insanity." Crowsky uncomfortably walked away from Elmstar and the rest of the gathering.

"What are we supposed to do about that?" Shadowpelt demanded once MoonClan returned to their camp.

"We well enforce our borders and be wary, but otherwise we will not be stepping in." Cloudstar explained. "If Elmstar fights SunClan he will lose, they are a large and powerful Clan and Foxstar will guide his Clan to victory. I'm not risking MoonClan lives when we are already facing sickness, I made that mistake before, I won't make it again."

Once Cloudstar finished speaking, she broke off into a violent

coughing fit. Once she finished, her body trembled. Badgerstripe ran to her side. "I told you not to go tonight." He sighed. "Come on, let's go to your den."

"Crowsky," Cloudstar spoke his name bodly. "Please, come with me. I need to speak with my deputy."

Crowsky looked to Bagderstripe who gave him a confirming nod and Crowsky followed his leader and medicine cat to the leader's den where Cloudstar curled up in her nest. "You are mousebrained, Cloudstar." Bagderstripe sighed. "You need rest, not to venture out and sit in the cold all night!"

"I'm sorry, Badgerstripe." Cloudstar rested her chin on her paws.

"I'm going to get you some herbs." Badgerstripe brushed past Crowsky out of the den.

"What did you want to talk about?" Crowsky questioned, sitting before his leader whose eyes were starting to close. "Is it about Elmstar."

"No," She opened her eyes half-way. "I'm feeling my life slip away from me, and this is my final one." Crowsky's heart twisted. "You will have to take over caring for the Clan when I am gone, but I know you will do great."

"Cloudstar I--"

Cloudstar weakly lifted her tail to silence him. "I knew you would be leading this Clan after I chose you, when I was made leader Owlstar showed me a vision. A dark cloud covered MoonClan when suddenly a crow tore through the cloud, clearing MoonClan of darkness. I made many mistakes, but leaving MoonClan in your paws is not one of them. You've struggled so much, and yet you came out as a brave and noble warrior."

Crowstar could see how exhausted Cloudstar was, she really shouldn't have gone to the gathering tonight. "I'll leave you to rest, Cloudstar." Crowstar rested his muzzle on Cloudstar's forehead. "Sleep well."

"Thank you for your service, Crowsky." Cloudstar breathed out. Crowsky left her den and met Badgerstripe outside.

"Is she--"

Crowsky shook his head. "But she's not far off, the stars are waiting for her."

"Are you ready to lead this Clan?" Badgerstripe questioned.

"I'm not sure," Crowsky looked up towards the stars. "But I know I'll have plenty of cats to support me."

"Of course." Badgestripe nodded. "I'm going to go see Cloudstar, we'll see what comes in the morning."

Crowsky bid Badgerstripe farewell and returned to the medicine cat den. Frostfire was waiting for him. "What's going on with Cloudstar? Is she okay?" Crowsky didn't want to worry his mate or any of his Clanmates, he curled up beside Frostfire and began rasping his tongue over her ears.

"We'll see tomorrow, for now we need to rest."

Crowsky woke up the next morning and could feel the grief filling the air, he knew what had happened as Badgerstripe faced his Clanmates. "Cloudstar was an amazing leader, despite the battles she may have led. In her final days, Cloudstar was a wonderful leader who I am proud to have served under."

The MoonClan cats turned around, resting their eyes on Crowsky. *They're expecting me to say something.* He cleared his throat and raised his voice. "When I left this Clan, I never thought I would become a warrior let alone leader, but I'm happy I returned. My life has never been better, and it's been an honor to know Cloudstar in her final days. I know I speak for the whole Clan when I say that she will be dearly missed. I hope that I can live up to her legacy once I begin my leadership over MoonClan."

"You will be a great leader." Rainypelt purred.

"I'll be happy to serve under you." Badgerstripe added.

The cats of MoonClan cheered for Crowsky, and he could feel their support flowing through his blood. *I can do this. I can be their leader.*

Chapter 43

I suppose I can't put this off any longer. Crowsky thought as he watched the elders carry Cloudstar's body away. *The moonstone awaits.* Crowsky noticed that Ravenheart was approaching him. "Badgerstripe wants me to escort you to the moonstone." He explained. "He wants me to experiencing the making of a new leader."

"I'd be happy if you joined me." Crowsky replied, he looked around for Frostfire. He wanted to let her know that he was leaving. "I'll be ready in just a moment."

"Take you time." Ravenheart encouraged.

Crowsky approached Frostfire and Icestorm. "Is it time?" Frostfire questioned. Crowsky nodded. "Good luck." Frostfire pressed her muzzle to his.

"Come back with nine, shiny new lives." Icestorm purred loudly. With their support behind him, Crowsky met up with Ravenheart.

"Ready?" Crowsky agreed and the two of them ventured out into the forest.

"Would you mind if we took the long way?" Crowsky questioned, he wanted to take in the forest one last time as a normal warrior.

"Of course, lead the way." Crowsky walked across the moor, he found his pawsteps leading him to the SunClan border. He wanted to see the river, he recalled when he had first gone fishing here, and when he had taken Ebonywing to fish here.

As they walked along the river bank Crowsky spotted a SunClan patrol, led by the deputy Flowerpelt. "Greetings." She dipped her head kindly.

"Hello." Crowsky returned her greeting.

"Where are you going." Flowerpelt questioned, adding quickly: "If you don't mind me asking."

"Cloudstar lost her last life." Ravenheart explained. "Crowsky is on his way to earn his nine lives."

"It's sad to hear that." Flowerpelt dipped her head. "But I know you'll be a great leader, Crowsky."

"Thank you, Flowerpelt." Crowsky mewed, he noticed Ravenheart looking slightly impatient. "But we should really get going, thank you for your kind words."

"May StarClan light your path." Rowanfall mewed.

"Yours as well." Ravenheart said in return and they two of them went on their way. They reached the Spirit Woods without any more interruptions and as they approached the Spirit Tree, Crowsky froze in his tracks. He realized that he had never seen the Moonstone before, he left before ever getting to go as an apprentice.

"Wait--" Crowsky stopped Ravenheart as the medicine cat prepared to enter.

"I have no idea what I'm supposed to do." Crowsky admitted.

"Once the moonstone lights up," He began explaining. "You will touch your nose to the stone's surface and you will fall asleep. From that moment on, it is up to StarClan to give you your nine lives."

Crowsky took a deep breath and followed Ravenheart into the tree. The cavern was pitch black, he could sense his medicine cat ahead of him but the tunnel got tighter and tighter. He could feel his pelt brushing the side of the tunnel and his heart began to pound inside of his chest. *Oh StarClan I don't know if I can do this.* Part of him wanted to turn tail and run out of the tunnel, but he knew he couldn't.

The tunnel finally opened up and Crowsky could tell that they were now in a large cave. "W-where is it?" Crowsky's voice echoed off the walls, he felt so trapped and terrified. *Cats don't belong underground!*

"Just wait."

In an instant a blinding, silver light filled the cavern. Crowsky jumped back slightly as he faced the moonstone, a brilliant silver stone with stars trapped in side. The sight of it took his breath away. *Oh my stars.* He thought. *This is really is.* He took a timid step forward and looked at Ravenheart who gave a small nod.

Crowsky took a deep breath and laid down before the stone, tucking his paws underneath his chest. *Just do it.* Crowsky forced his muzzle forward and as soon as his nose touched the cold surface, he was plunged into darkness immediately.

Crowsky couldn't move, it didn't even feel like he was breathing. His body was as frozen as the forest above him. *What is happening?* He struggled to find his breath, and for a moment wondered if StarClan had rejected him. As the thought crossed his mind, warmth filled his body and he felt grass beneath him.

At long last Crowsky was able to open his eyes and he found himself in the gathering hollow alone. *Where is everyone?* He stood up and looked around, confused until he saw that the stars above were moving. He tensed slightly as the stars fell from the sky and started to form in front of him. Nine cats appeared, cats he knew and loved throughout his entire life.

The first cat he spotted was Ivy, her beautiful eyes and pelt filled his heart with grief and loss, he opened his mouth to speak but another voice interrupted him. "Welcome, Crowsky." Countless voice spoke from an unseen location. "Are you ready to receive your nine lives?"

"Yes." Crowsky's voice trembled.

"Then let us begin."

The first cat to step forward was Owlstar, it had been so long since Crowsky had seen the old leader. He faced the bold white tom with his head held high. "I always hoped you would return to MoonClan, and now that you have I am proud to give you one of your nine lives." Crowsky waited, trying not to show his fear. "With this life I

give you loyalty, never forget where you heart lies. Your loyalty should be to your Clanmates above anything else, for you are nothing without them."

Owlstar touched his nose to Crowsky's, the pain was completely unexpected. Crowsky felt the guilt he had felt when leaving MoonClan, the way he had turned his back on them. It slowly faded away with the satisfaction of serving his Clan."

"That--that hurt."

"Not all lives with feel the same, young one." Owlstar walked away and returned to the ranks of StarClan. The next cat to approach him was a tiny black kit with eager, blue eyes. *Is that..?*

"I've waited a long time to meet you." The tiny kit squeaked. "My name is Ravenkit, I am your sister."

"Ravenkit..." Crowsky stared at his sister, he never thought he would meet her. "I wish I could've known you."

"Me too, but I've been able to watch your journey." She trotted forward. "With this life I give you joy. When times get hard, never forget to find joy and happiness in your life." Crowsky head to bend touch to touch his muzzle to Ravenkit's. Her life flowed through his body, the pure joy inside of his chest almost made him laugh, he was sad when it faded away.

"Thank you, Ravenkit." Crowsky purred and Ravenkit trotted away to where she was sitting beside Riverlight, who was the next cat to approach him. He was a little shocked to see that Riverlight was here to give him a life.

Riverlight bowed her head. "It's an honor to see you here, Crowsky. With your forgiveness I was able to find my peace here in the stars, and I am finally reunited with my beautiful daughter, and while she is in the stars I am happy to watch you lead the Clan. You may not need this life, but it's something I don't want you to forget it. With this life I give you forgiveness, use it to forgive the mistakes of others, because forgiveness is better than hatred, I wish I had learned that when I was alive."

Riverlight touched her muzzle to Crowsky's and pain rocked his body. The anger and pain he felt from the way Riverlight treated him, seeing Elmstar after he murdered Blacksky and Cooper who banished him from his old home. After a moment, the pain faded. "You'll do great, Crowsky." Riverlight returned to Ravenkit and Crowsky waited for the next cat in line which was Skyclaw.

"I'm happy to see MoonClan under your leadership." Skyclaw said. "With this life I give you wisdom, use it to guide your Clan and make choices based on thought and intellect." Skyclaw touched his nose and Crowsky was met with the frustration of struggling to make a hard choice, but it soon faded as well. Skyclaw dipped his head and returned to the crowd.

Emotion filled Crowsky's heart as he saw the next cat to approach, it was Blacksky. "I am so proud of you, my son." Blacksky said, his voice shaking with emotion. "And I'm even prouder to give you one of your nine lives."

"I couldn't have done any of this without you, father." Crowsky admitted. "I miss you."

"I miss you too, but you have a long life ahead of you. So with this life I give you determination, use it to never let your spirit get dragged down. Use it to *never* give up, even when you feel like your world is crumbling." As Crowsky touched noses to his father, he felt the raging fear of failure, the desire to give up only to be overcome by the satisfaction of winning.

"I'll always be with you, Crowsky." Blacksky bowed his head and Silverpool took his place. She was back to her strong, agile self, Crowsky was overjoyed to see her.

"Just as your father, I am so unbelievably proud of you." Silverpool purred. "It's been such a wonderful honor to watch you grow up. With this life I give you a mother's love, you may not have kits of your own but I want you to care for all of your Clanmates as a mother cares for her kits." Silverpool touched Crowsky's nose with her own and the pain that followed shook him to his core. He felt the pain of wanting to do *anything* to protect his Clanmates, no matter the cost to him.

"That--" Crowsky trembled.

"A mother's love is unlike anything." Silverpool mewed. "Never lose sight of that feeling." Silverpool returned to the crowd and next was a young white she-cat that Crowsky had never seen before.

"Greetings, Crowsky." She bowed her head. "My name is Snowpaw, I am the sister of Lightningwing and Pigeonpelt. I died to yellowcough before you arrived."

Crowsky's eyes widened a little bit. "Oh, I'm sorry I didn't get home in time to save you."

Snowpaw shook her head. "There's no need to apologize, I'm glad my sister got to live. With this life I give you a sense of adventure, life will get hard but you should never forget to find adventure within it, even though you may never travel beyond the borders again." Snowpaw's life felt similar to Ravenkit's, it was welcoming and calming.

Snowpaw returned and pain surged through Crowsky's heart as he watched Ivy approached next. "Oh, Ivy." He breathed out. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Crowsky." Ivy purred. "And I'm so excited to give you this life, living in StarClan has been such an amazing experience, and I've gotten to know the cats who love you so much, just as I do."

"I miss you." Crowsky admitted, though he loved Frostfire, Ivy never left his heart.

"I miss you too, but you have a long life ahead of you. Keep loving Frostfire, I will be waiting for you when it's time." Ivy touched her nose to Crowsky's. "With this life I give your curiosity, never forget the joy of finding new things and always be willing to learn more." Ivy's life flowed into him, it was warm and welcoming, the pull of curiosity. He breathed in her sweet scent for as long as he could.

Ivy was finally forced to step back, he held onto her loving gaze for as long as he could before Ivy returned to the crowd and Cloudstar

stood up in her turn. "I'm excited to see what you will bring MoonClan, Crowsky. You will be a great leader."

"Thank you, Cloudstar." Crowsky bowed his head.

"With this life I give you pride, have pride in yourself and your Clanmates. Never forget the pride of being a MoonClan cat." Cloudstar and Crowsky touched muzzles for the last time and Crowsky felt a surging feeling of pride for his Clan, the Clan he would lead into a brighter future.

Cloudstar stepped back and raised her voice. I hail you by your new name, Crowstar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of MoonClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

"Crowstar! Crowstar!" The cats of StarClan cheered his new name and he felt the power of nine lives flowing through his body, part of him now. He was truly a leader now, and he was ready to lead MoonClan.

Epilogue

Crowstar breathed in the warm scent of newleaf, the snow had vanished, leaving a new world for hunting. Crowstar had been leader for several moons now, and it had came so easily to him. He had named Hawkface as his deputy, the warrior was brave and strong and he served MoonClan well. Crowstar lived in his new den with Frostfire always at his side, he enjoyed his new life.

A lot had changed around the forest, after a violent battle against SunClan, Elmstar had been overthrown and Jaggedstar now led LichenClan. Both SunClan and AshClan had new leaders as well in Flowerstar and Lionstar. It felt like a new era for the forest, not just for MoonClan. Life was blooming in MoonClan as well as Ashfeather was the first new queen in many moons, carrying Smallstrike's kits. Tawnytail had also moved into the nursery expecting Smudgenose's kits. Crowstar was incredibly excited to see Silverpool's bloodline continued in the Clan.

Everything felt so perfect around MoonClan, Crowstar was enjoying the peace and he hoped it never ended. Being leader involved guiding his Clan, but he still patrolled and hunted with the rest of his Clanmates. He never wanted that to change. Crowstar looked over his Clanmates, they were busy at work with patrols and hunting. They had already been assigned by Hawkface, but Crowstar wanted to get his paws out on the moor.

He started to leave camp, stopped by Icestorm. "Where you off to?" She questioned curiously.

"Going to stretch my paws out on the moor." Crowstar replied. "When Frostfire gets back tell her to save me from prey."

"Don't keep her waiting too long," Icestorm laughed. "You know how she gets without prey!"

Crowstar shared a laugh with his friend before breaking into a run across the moor, he felt his life flowing through his paws. The moor

would always be his home, no matter what changed. He recalled his life as a loner, he thought about them a lot. He hoped all of his former friends were living full lives, including Cooper. *I hope he knows that Ivy is happy among the stars.*

Crowstar's paws beat against the moor, the scent of rabbits and heather warmed his entire body. Crowstar neared the LichenClan border and he spotted movement in the trees. Crowstar stopped running and focused on the figure, he recognized the reddish-brown pelt of Jaggedstar.

"Greetings, stranger." Crowstar called across the border and Jaggedstar looked towards the moor.

"Well hello there." Jaggedstar purred. "How's the prey running?"

"Not as fast as me." Crowstar laughed. "You?"

"Wonderful." Both Jaggedstar and Crowstar met at the border. "Just needed a walk, you know?"

Crowstar nodded. "Being a leader can be exhausting, cats expect a lot out of you."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Jaggedstar mewed. "But sometimes I miss just being a normal warrior."

"I hear that." Crowstar sat down and Jaggedstar sat down beside him, they were sitting across both territoires. "I've found myself thinking about the past a lot lately."

"Your past is a big mystery to me." Jaggedstar joked. "You disappeared for so long."

"Yeah." Crowstar stared into the distance. "I had to venture out, kind of a personal mission."

"What do you mean?"

Crowstar continued to tell Jaggedstar the story of his journey, from meeting Sheba, to the coyotes, to finding the loners and the tale of Ivy and her death. At long last he finished the story with when he

returned home.

"Wow." Jaggedstar breathed out. "That's quite the story."

Crowstar nodded. "It seems like it happened so long ago, but I'm happy where I am now. That journey defined who I am."

"The past tends to do that." Jaggedstar's eyes crossed with a dark shadow of sadness.

"Are you thinking about Elmstar?"

Jaggedstar nodded slowly. "Yes, having to kill him was the hardest thing I've ever done." Jaggedstar met Crowstar's gaze. "But he wanted me to tell you something, he wanted to apologize for killing your father. I don't expect you to forgive him but Elmstar was very troubled by the end of his life, I wish you could've known him as I did."

Crowstar thought for a moment, Blacksky had died so long ago. Everything had changed since then, he had forgiven the cat who brought him the most pain and she had given him a life for forgiveness. "I do forgive him, I owe that to someone I used to know in my life."

"I'm very glad to hear that." Jaggedstar bowed his head. "Elmstar is too." Jaggedstar looked back towards his territory. "You know, a war started between Owlstar and Birdstar, then Jumpstar and Cloudstar inherited it. It may have ended by the end of their lifetimes. However, with you and I as the new leaders of MoonClan and LichenClan, perhaps we can lead a new era of peace."

"I would love that." Crowstar purred. "We will lead into a new era, together." Jaggedstar and Crowstar looked up at the sky, taking in the moment and Crowstar knew that there would be peace and happiness between their two Clans for as long as he led.

"Crowstar," Ravenheart's voice spoke from outside his den. "Shadowpelt is here to see you."

Crowstar lifted his head, he felt weaker with each passing breath. "Please, send him in." Speaking hurt his throat, but he had to say his

final goodbyes. He had led for so long, and MoonClan had changed in so many ways. He has lost cats and gained new Clanmates. Badgerstripe had passed and now Ravenheart was the sole medicine cat. His first deputy Hawkface had passed and Crowstar had named Shadowpelt as his new deputy.

In the passing seasons, Shadowpelt had matured and made up for his former behavior and was now one of Crowstar's closest friends. Crowstar had faced death eight times before this, and he knew what it felt like. As greencough gripped his body, he could feel the stars calling to him. *I'm ready.* He thought, he had waited so long to see Ivy again.

"Crowstar," Shadowpelt stepped into the den. "How are you feeling?"

"Not the best." Crowstar chuckled. "I'm glad to see you, I wanted to say goodbye to my deputy. I know you will lead this Clan right."

"I'll do my best to honor you, Crowstar." Shadowpelt bowed his head. "I'll make you proud."

"I don't doubt that, Shadowpelt. It'll be an honor to give you one of your nine lives."

"Crowstar?" A concerned mew spoke as Frostfire stepped into his den. Frostfire had been his mate for a very long time, he loved her dearly. She had guided him through so much, he would miss her. "Oh..." She breathed out, she realized what was happening.

Frostfire curled up beside Crowstar, he enjoyed her warmth in the cold season. "Please, Frostfire. Do not let my death drag you down, you still have a lot of life in you."

"I know." Frostfire breathed out, touching her muzzle to his. "I love you, Crowstar."

"I love you too." They shared a long moment together, breathing was getting harder and harder for him. "Shadowpelt," He turned his head slowly. "You may go, I wish to spend my final moments alone with Frostfire."

"I understand." Shadowpelt bowed his head and left the den, leaving Crowstar alone with his mate.

"I'll miss you," Frostfire whimpered. "We all will."

"I'll miss you too, but I have no regrets in this life. The stars are waiting for me, my family is waiting."

Frostfire began slowly grooming his pelt. "I hope your journey to the stars is a safe one, I'll be watching for an extra star in Silverpelt tonight." She leaned in close, nuzzling him lovingly. "Say hi to Ivy for me, give her the love you've been waiting for. I'll see you again soon, my love."

Crowstar breathed out slowly, the world was starting to slow so much. He breathed in Frostfire's sweet scent, welcoming her warmth and love. *I love her so much.* Crowstar thought as his heart began to fail. Something caught his eye, stars began to form ahead of him. Crowstar looked up slowly, Ivy stood before him, as beautiful as she ever was.

"Ivy..." He breathed out her name, she was waiting for him. *I'm ready. I'm coming Ivy.* Crowstar took one final breath, and as he breathed out darkness filled the world and he was welcomed into the stars.